

HARRY POTTER AND THE UNFORGIVEN

A Sixth Year Harry Potter Fanfiction

BY

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“Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus.”

...never tickle a sleeping dragon

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: the following work of fanfiction is a Harry/Ginny 'ship' fic with heavy angst, dark overtones, and adult themes. This is an AU sixth year story; all events up to the end of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix are considered canonical.

Prologue: Sibling Rivalry begins while Harry, Hermione, Ron & Ginny are traveling home on the Hogwarts Express at the end of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.

Feedback of any kind is always appreciated.

More information on Harry Potter and the Unforgiven can be found at my website, which is linked in my Author Profile.

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PROLOGUE

Sibling Rivalry

“Your brother is here, Mister Weasley.”

Bill looked up from the piles of paperwork on his desk and nodded to the goblin standing in the doorway. Only those who knew the curse-breaker well would have noticed the slight narrowing of his eyes, or the tension along his jaw.

“Thank you, Griphook. Send him in.”

With a grunt of acknowledgement, the diminutive creature walked out. Bill smiled at the departing goblin’s back; he had always admired the enigmatic dignity of goblins. He respected what they had built for themselves in a human-dominated world.

He glanced down at the stack of reports on his desk and settled back to finish at least the top one.

Charlie will be a few minutes, especially if he brought her with him.

But he couldn’t concentrate. Sighing, he slid the whole stack into a leather case and sealed it shut. He’d just have to finish it at home.

Merlin, I hate this job.

Bill winced at the bitter taste of disloyalty the thought left behind. Until a year ago, he had loved his job; he had found a home away from home.

Egypt was a place of desolate beauty. A sun-scorched landscape of forgotten treasures and dark mystery. He had been both a scholar and an adventurer, exploring the hidden places of the world and pitting himself against ancient magics. When this was all over, he hoped to go back to Egypt, maybe move there permanently.

But when Albus Dumbledore had invited him to join the Order of the Phoenix, Bill couldn’t refuse. There were some things greater than just himself. Bill had accepted a promotion he’d put off for years – Chief of the Gringotts Curse-Breakers.

‘Curse-breaker’. The name the rest of the wizarding world gave them always amused him; they broke more than curses and hunted for

more than treasure. The goblins running the wizarding bank kept the truth of their Curse Breakers a closely guarded secret. He had always been told no one outside Gringotts knew what the Curse-Breakers really were, but Albus Dumbledore had known.

Doesn't miss a trick, that man. Bill had heard his father mutter those words about the Headmaster countless times as a child. As an adult, Bill had learned how true those words were.

"Dreaming of hot sands and rotting corpses?" The almost gravelly voice was light, bantering, but Bill heard the tension underlying it.

Bill looked up at his brother impassively. "Charlie."

The stockiest and heaviest built of the Weasley brothers, Charlie's face was weathered and seamed with small scars. His hands were rough and calloused from years of working with dragons – and against the men who hunted them. By far the strongest of the brothers, he had spent his adult life in harsh, remote wilderness preserves, helping to maintain the secrecy of the magical world. There was very little that could frighten him.

But he was afraid of facing what he had done to his older brother. Leaning against the doorframe with exaggerated casualness, he glanced at Bill's desk.

"Are we still going to do this?"

Bill shrugged, and grabbed the leather satchel, but made no move to stand. "Don't see why not. Is she with you?"

Charlie nodded grimly. "Yes. She's coming with us tonight. And...I think she wants to talk to you."

Bill shook his head. "I'll find another way home, then."

"You can't get past the wards, Bill. Everyone else has gone home for the day. It's us, or you spend the night at the office."

Bill closed his eyes and rested his forehead against his hand. "I suppose there's a reason why you know the way through the wards and I don't?"

"Damn straight there is," Charlie snapped. "I was there to help set the new wards this morning."

Bill's eyes flashed, and for a brief second, Charlie remembered that behind Bill's normally calm face, he still had the Weasley temper.

"I'm the only link the Order has with Gringotts. What should I have done, just not gone to work?"

Charlie pushed off the doorframe. "That's a bloody sorry excuse. Damn it, it's the Burrow! It's our home that's playing host to the Order! I'm sure your paperwork could have waited a few hours for you to help us protect it – and I know the Order wouldn't have had a problem with it!"

Bill slumped, looking tired. "Trust, Charlie. I trust the Order to protect my home and my family, and the Order trusts me to keep Gringotts from turning to You-Know-Who." The hollow look in Bill's eyes told Charlie just how close to the bone his remark had cut. "And despite everything, I still trust you."

Charlie breathed out slowly, and forced himself not to look away from the hurt on his brother's face.

"I think Dad wants you to stay the night and set your own wards come morning. None of us, except maybe Dumbledore, have your touch."

Bill smiled wanly. "My 'touch' hasn't helped much, has it?"

Charlie tried to count to ten but he didn't make it past three.

"Damn it, Bill, we didn't mean for it to happen! You didn't believe her and I did! She needed me, and it just happened!"

The silence suddenly seemed louder than it had a moment before.

"I know," Bill's voice was hoarse. "And I did believe her, Charlie. I just disagreed – disagree – with what's been decided."

Charlie sighed, and raked his hands through his hair. "The Order didn't believe her, and you didn't try to convince them! Damn it, Bill, if she's right, then this is the best chance we have. And he's our brother! Can't you trust him, too?"

Shrugging, the eldest Weasley shook his head. "No. Because he's doing this for the wrong reasons."

Charlie growled, looking for a moment like he was going to tear at his hair. "Then why the hell are you helping us?"

"Because someone has to be on Harry's side."

Charlie ground his teeth, all guilt momentarily forgotten. "We all are. Whether you believe it or not."

Bill stood, and cut Charlie off with a sharp gesture. "Enough. It's too late to change anything at this point." He looked up at his clock. "Come on. Let's get this over with."

The two walked out into Bill's reception area. She was waiting, perfectly poised, languidly lounging in one of the comfortable leather chairs. She swept herself to her feet, long silvery blonde hair falling around her pale, delicate face.

"Fleur." Bill nodded politely, but kept his eyes down. Some things, he desperately needed to keep private.

She took a tentative step towards him. "Bill, I..."

Charlie stepped close to her and gripped her hand tightly, shaking his head. Now wasn't the time.

She nodded almost imperceptibly, and stepped closer to Charlie. Charlie's arm went from her hand to around her waist, trying to give her what comfort he could.

“Ready?” He asked.

Bill put a hand on his brother’s shoulder, and they apparated into the Burrow’s kitchen with a heavy explosion of air. Bill sneezed a bit; no matter how good at Apparition Charlie got, the air always smelled of sulfur at the other end of the spell.

“You’re late.” Mad-Eye Moody grumbled. “Never known a Weasley to be on time.”

Charlie shrugged dismissively. He’d never had much tolerance for Moody’s guff. “And?”

The retired Auror snorted and gave Fleur a distasteful once over. “Let’s make this quick so I don’t miss the train. Your mother wants a few of the Order there to...remind Potter’s relatives he has friends who will gladly transfigure them into something small, slimy and invertebrate.”

Even Charlie smiled at that. “So I heard. Is he here yet?”

“Ah-hem?” Percy cleared his throat. “It hasn’t been that long since you last saw me, Charlie.”

Bill and Charlie saw Percy sitting at the head of the table, in neatly pressed dark purple robes that clashed with his red hair. In front of him, he had a large number of scrolls, each sealed with wax imprinted with the Minister’s seal.

“Please, sit.” Percy gestured magnanimously to the remaining chairs. Charlie still shot his brother a glare for his high-handed courtesy, but Percy didn’t seem to notice. Annoyed there was no real reason to refuse, the four of them sat.

“The Minister’s office is very grateful you chose to approach us with this information, and I am here to convey the Minister’s heartfelt thanks.” He sat up a bit straighter, if that were possible. “And on a personal note, I would like to say how proud I am that two of my brothers could look past the rivalries of the past and work towards mutual cooperation in the upcoming troubles.”

Moody barked out a laugh. "Upcoming troubles, boy? Troubles are already here, and your precious Minister is too bloody daft to realize it. That you're here instead of him proves that."

"You told the Minister?" Bill asked incredulously. "Why?"

Percy bristled a bit. "Surely you didn't think approaching me as you did that I would not pass along the information to my superiors?"

"Non," Fleur interjected. "Zat is exactly what I had in mind. Ze minister, he can do things to help us?"

Percy nodded eagerly, finding it hard to tear his eyes away from the part-Veela. "Oh yes, Miss Delacour. I can promise you the minister is already taking steps to do just that. He is sending his personal representative to speak with the Dursleys. They should already have his Owl, and I am most sure everything will be arranged by the time they pick him up from King's Cross."

Fleur nodded. "Merci, Monsieur Weasley."

Percy slid two scrolls to each of them. "These are copies of the Minister's instructions to the Dursleys, and a letter of personal thanks from the Minister. I promise you that the Minister's office will take every step necessary to protect Harry."

End Chapter

PART I

DOWN TO NONE

CHAPTER ONE

Return to Privet Drive

Harry Potter's life began and ended every year at King's Cross Station, between platforms nine and ten; between his world and theirs.

It was the demilitarized zone between his life with the Dursleys and his life at Hogwarts. He entered King's Cross to enter the Wizarding world; he left it to leave the Wizarding world.

But this time, walking out of King's Cross station didn't seem to change a thing. The portal closed behind him and he stepped onto the asphalt parking lot. But nothing changed.

The weight was still there; the knot between his shoulders and the aching sense of loss. There was nothing to look forward to but months of living with people who resented the very fact he had been born.

Maybe they're right to.

Green eyes blinked against the sudden glare of the sun.

For a moment, he wanted to look behind him. To see them watching him leave; maybe he would turn and see the huddle of redheads and a bushy-haired witch waving, or watching.

But he might also see the witches and wizards of the Order of the Phoenix, each dedicated to stopping the dark wizard Harry had to kill.

... either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives...

If he turned and looked for them, he might see them sad he had to go; he might see their worry, their sympathy. He didn't want to see how much they cared. He didn't want to be loved.

How many more of them will die because of me?

People died because of him. Just because he had been born.

...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...

Sibyll Trelawney's voice grated in his thoughts. It was no wonder she was always predicting he would die. Maybe she knew Voldemort would win, and he would die?

Or that we both will die. The Prophecy doesn't say one of us will live, only that one of us must die. He found it almost funny he was already thinking of it as 'the Prophecy' instead of 'a prophecy'

"Hurry up, boy! Get in the car!" Vernon Dursley yelled at his nephew, impatience twisting the rounded lines of his heavy jowls. He stood next to his car, tapping his foot impatiently.

Strange as it was, Harry knew Vernon wouldn't leave him behind. He didn't understand why the Dursleys always waited for him; they really had no reason to, ancient magic or not. But every summer they were there, inexplicably compelled to participate in the scripted farce as much as he was.

He blinked the glare of the sun out of his eyes, suddenly realizing he had stopped walking just outside the doors of King's Cross. Pulling his trunk off the luggage trolley with one hand, he picked up a battered cage in the other. From behind its bent bars, a snowy owl squawked her displeasure at him.

Quickly dragging his trunk over to the car, he heaved it into the boot before sitting in the backseat behind Vernon and next to Dudley - who took up both the passenger and middle seats. He settled Hedwig's cage between his feet and hastily tugged on his safety belt.

Vernon squeezed himself into the driver's seat, sucking in his gut to fit behind the steering wheel. Glaring back at Harry, Vernon angrily slammed his massive foot on the accelerator. The car lurched out of the car park and onto the road.

The car jerked and turned. King's Cross was behind them now. Harry sagged against the seat, suddenly drained, as if something had been ripped out of him. He closed his eyes, feeling hollow; empty.

"How dare those...people...speak to ME like that, in public no less!" Vernon bellowed, honking at another driver. "Obviously, you haven't learned any respect or gratitude at that school of yours, boy. But mark my words, if you know what's good for you, those freaks won't bother us all summer."

He felt laughter well up at his Uncle's threat. If I know what's good for me? Obviously, I don't.

It was good for him to remain ignorant of a prophecy about him. It was good for him to be kept ignorant of events in the wizarding world, isolated from his friends. It was good for him to have his mind invaded by a man who hated him for being his father's son. It was good for him to stay with the Dursleys all summer. It was good for him to endure their abuse, so he wouldn't be beaten or starved while being 'protected' by ancient magic no one bothered to properly explain to him.

Why is it everyone who thinks they know what's 'good' for me never bothers to ask me?

He clenched his right fist, and the fingerless dragonhide glove creaked; the new leather was still stiff. But it breathed, and covered his latest scar; a scar he had because Dolores Umbridge considered it good for him.

Now, the words 'I must not tell lies' were etched into his flesh, and were the last thing he wanted his muggle relatives to see.

The glove had been a last minute addition to his wardrobe. Just before leaving Hogwarts, he had found it lying on his bed, with a note scrawled on a scrap of parchment:

“Hope this keeps the muggles from asking too many questions.”

Forcing his fingers to uncurl, Harry smiled grimly to himself. He had no idea who had give it to him – cured dragonhide was expensive, and whoever his mysterious benefactor was, they knew his size perfectly.

And they know a lot more about my ‘family’ than I want them to.

“...are you even listening to me, boy?” Vernon turned to face him, his mustached face a frightening shade of purple.

Harry opened his eyes and shrugged. “I’m trying. But I’m tired.”

And I don’t really care. If I listen, you yell. If I ignore you, you yell.

Vernon grew quiet, a normal color returning to his face. He spoke softly, and with more emotion in his voice than Harry had suspected he had.

“This summer will be different, boy. You will do as you are told and you keep your...abnormality...to yourself. Do you understand me, boy? Or you’ll start to miss lord Voldie-whatsit and his dementoids.”

Something ominous in Vernon’s calm voice sent a shiver down his spine. Even with the Order keeping closer watch, Vernon would still make his life at Privet Drive an interminable purgatory where he would pay for everything he had done. Or hadn’t done.

Vernon turned back around to concentrate on his driving, glaring ahead of him as heavy clouds obscured the sun. The early evening sunset turned into a sea of gray ripples, dappling the diffused light until the edges of things began to blur. Which made Uncle Vernon’s speeding down the curvy road all the more disconcerting.

Harry heard his aunt Petunia swallow a choking sound, and look plaintively at her husband. Harry looked toward her, absently noticing she looked miserable – and faintly green, like she was about to vomit. She looked different, too. A bit fleshier, maybe, as if she were slowly coming to resemble her husband and son.

It struck him as somehow amusing that the woman who protected him from Voldemort merely by being alive was getting carsick.

As if it weren't ironic enough that the three of them have the power to decide the outcome of the war, just because they have power over me.

The thought made him feel as sick as his aunt looked.

Outside the car, it began to rain.

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Rain cleansed the sky.

Thunder cracked, and the air shuddered around him, drowning out Hedwig's screeching protests.

He wrestled his trunk out of the car by the light of streetlamps. What light the moon might have given was obscured by black thunderclouds, turned into roiling shadows overhead. Lightning leapt from cloud to cloud, obscured by the rain falling in sheets around him.

He barely noticed.

Dudley and Vernon ushered Petunia into the house under an umbrella, Harry dragging his trunk after them, wanting nothing more than a hot shower and to hide in his room.

But he was met by his Uncle's sneering face as he walked in the door.

"I told you this summer is different, boy. My cousin Veronica lives here now, and we've given her your bedroom."

Harry and his Uncle locked eyes, and Harry understood.

There was no use speaking. No use arguing. Sirius wasn't there to protect him from the Dursleys; and obviously Mr Weasley's and Mad-Eye Moody's threats didn't have nearly the same impact.

Just one more thing his stupidity had lost him. One more thing that Sirius wouldn't be around to do, because he had a 'saving people thing.'

He said nothing as he stepped past his uncle, pulling his trunk and Hedwig's cage towards the cupboard under the stairs.

It took no small amount of effort to wrestle the trunk inside, but he eventually maneuvered it to the foot of his cot. Acutely aware his Uncle was still watching, Harry picked up Hedwig's cage, and hung it on a cross-beam.

Vernon loomed in the doorway, towering over the shivering, rain-soaked teenager. "Get yourself cleaned up, boy. We'll be having company, so you'd best be ready by the time I get Veronica out of the house."

Harry didn't understand what his uncle was getting at, but he wasn't willing to risk asking questions.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon."

Don't ask questions. It was the first rule to survival in the Dursley household.

In less than a day, he had gone from being the favored son of the Order of the Phoenix, prophesied savior of the wizarding world, to feeling like a small child caught doing something wrong.

Vernon closed the door. A second later, Harry heard the click of the lock.

Shivering, Harry stripped off his sopping wet clothes, and stuffed them into a plastic bag from his trunk. He pulled on more of Dudley's

cast offs: overlarge jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. He even donned the hood; for some reason, it felt good to hide.

He went to close his trunk and his hand brushed something warm and soft; one of the sweaters Molly Weasley had sent him. He snatched his hand back as if burned, staring at the sweater like he didn't believe it was really there. A long-buried part of him had trouble accepting that a gift from Molly Weasley could manage to exist inside his cupboard. The part of Harry that was still a small, scared boy couldn't believe he would be given anything like that.

He shoved the bag of wet clothes into his trunk and closed it.

I can't think about being there. I have to concentrate on here. Harry knew Dumbledore wouldn't rescue him from the Dursleys just because he was living in the cupboard. He was alive, and would likely remain so until the magical protections on him had recharged.

But eleven years of memory were hard to push away, and all of them were threatening to rush back at him. More than just being in the cupboard again scared him: something was going on with the Dursleys. He didn't know what, but he knew it was probably bad for him.

Why is Veronica moving in and why does Uncle Vernon want her gone while we have company? For that matter, why would he want me there with company over?

He'd met cousin Veronica only once before, when he had been eight or nine. She had been everything Aunt Marge wanted to be – a tall, stately, regal matronly presence that could overwhelm and command just by being there. But she was eminently Dursley – a lifelong spinster and professional governess, Veronica was not the kind of woman to appreciate the eccentricities of wizarding folk.

Harry vaguely recalled something about her having helped raise Uncle Vernon and Aunt Marge while their parents were doing something that Veronica, Vernon and Marge had all seemed to consider rather important. And he'd often gotten the impression that Veronica was someone rather important in her own right – it made no

sense for Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia not to want her around when company called.

Unless...is it someone from the Order? Is that why Uncle Vernon doesn't want her around?

Harry realized he was trying to pace, and forced himself to stop, almost bumping into Hedwig's cage.

Hedwig rustled her wings and hooted mournfully.

Pushing his fingers through the bars, Harry stroked the owl, trying to reassure her.

"I'm sorry girl; I can't let you out yet. I will, tonight, after everyone's asleep. But you can't come back. It's not safe here."

She nipped his finger reproachfully.

His feeling of foreboding grew stronger. "Uncle Vernon's right, Hedwig. Something about this summer is different and I don't know what's changed. I have to send you away, to keep him from hurting you too."

I can't let who and what I am keep hurting the people close to me.

He sank back against the wall and closed his eyes, trying not to remember Hermione warning him the vision of Sirius was a trap. Reminding him he had failed to learn Occlumency, that he had lied about learning it - that he was vulnerable. She had been right. She had known, just like she always did.

Like always, I didn't listen. Like always, I did the stupid thing and ended up a bloody hero.

The headlines in the Daily Prophet proved it; when a scapegoat was needed, they could always turn to Harry Potter, the fifteen-year-old boy who barely understood why he mattered. And when they wanted a hero as much as they needed a scapegoat, well – he was just supposed to be that, too.

His uncle hammered his fist on the door, and Harry heard him opening the lock.

“Get out here, boy. She’s here to see you!”

Harry started. To see me? Who’s here to see me?

He quickly pulled on his shoes and socks, and was surprised to see his trainers were already dry. He hadn’t already been in here that long, had he?

Harry could remember times as a child locked in the cupboard when time had seemed to speed up or slow down. Was he already back to the point where he couldn’t keep track of things when he was locked in there?

He hesitantly walked into the parlor, hoarding a small kernel of hope their guest was a member of the Order, or someone Dumbledore sent. Someone who could send word how he was already being treated. He saw Petunia and Vernon were already sitting next to each other on the couch and their visitor was settled in one of Petunia’s antique dining chairs. She looked up at Harry and smiled.

“So nice to see you again, Mr Potter. Why don’t you sit down, and we can begin?”

Harry would never forget that saccharine voice, or the squat, toad-like woman it belonged to.

End Chapter

CHAPTER TWO

Reparations and Retribution

Harry stared into the beady eyes of Dolores Umbridge.

“What are you doing here?” He practically spat the words at her.

She just kept smiling. “Now, now, Mister Potter, no need to be rude. Now sit down. Mouth closed, ears open. I’d hate to have to impress upon you another lesson.”

Harry open and closed his right hand, feeling the new dragonhide scrape across the scar.

“I’ll stand, thank you.”

Dolores shook her head reproachfully. “So rude, Mister Potter. So rude. Albus would be ashamed at your manners. And I’m sure you don’t want to be so rude in front of your Aunt and Uncle.”

Harry just glared at her. “Why are you here? What did Fudge send you here for?”

Dolores held up her hand. “Minister Fudge, Harry. Now please, sit.” Her voice took on a harder edge.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. “I said I’ll stand.”

Vernon rose to his feet and crossed the space between him and Harry in two steps, using his momentum to shove Harry to the ground. He stood over his nephew, his great chest heaving, all but frothing at the mouth.

“Sit, boy! Don’t you dare think of getting up until she’s done here. She’s here because of you, boy. You’ll do as she says until I say otherwise.”

Vernon and Harry locked eyes. Harry broke away first, glancing over Vernon’s shoulder at Umbridge. Vernon jumped, whirling around to

stare at Umbridge, tensed, waiting for her to strike him down for attacking Harry Potter.

Dolores Umbridge giggled, looking positively gleeful. "Oh, neatly done, Mister Dursley, neatly done! You handle him quite well, if I do say so myself. I've often said it's high time the lad get a taste of solid discipline."

Vernon and Petunia were rendered speechless. Usually, they encountered wizards who seemed intent on protecting Harry from them. While their attention was elsewhere, Harry levered himself up, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"Now then, I think it's only fair if I introduce myself." She settled herself more comfortably in her chair, and pulled a sheaf of envelopes out of her purse before setting it beside her. "My name is Dolores Umbridge. I am the senior undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, Mr Cornelius Fudge, and I am the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where your nephew, Harry James Potter, attends under Headmaster Albus Dumbledore."

Vernon and Petunia flinched at each title and name, but were too shocked to speak.

Dolores leaned forward. "I am here today to convey to you Minister Fudge's deepest apologies."

Harry felt his stomach sink as Dolores turned to stare at him, her beady eyes hard and cold.

He could hear Petunia demurring. "Apologies? But why would you or your, er, Ministry need to apologize?"

"Quite simple, really." Harry was shocked as Dolores Umbridge managed to look almost contrite, keeping her eyes on Harry. "Your unfortunate situation is entirely our fault. The Ministry of Magic and the wizarding community, that is."

"Ahh...your fault?" Petunia asked, dabbing at her forehead with a soft cloth.

“Most assuredly, Mrs Dursley. But this kind of uncomfortable business always gives one a sour stomach, and I’m sure we could all do with a spot of tea. Now, I’m sure Harry would be perfectly happy to fetch us tea, wouldn’t you, Harry?”

Harry stood, trying not to sound sullen. “Of course, Professor.”

Her smile followed him as he walked into the kitchen and put water on to boil. While it heated, he got out Petunia’s best tea service, and started looking for scones or biscuits or something to serve with it.

Wishing for one of the twins’ Extendable Ears, he strained to hear Umbridge as she explained.

“You are not members of the Wizarding community and you have not only been forced to care for one of our children, but you have been repeatedly threatened or had your life disrupted by other members of our community.”

She sighed, and Harry knew she was shaking her head. “None of which should have ever happened. Harry could have been easily placed with an appropriate wizarding family – and to interfere with anyone outside of our community violates a tradition stronger than law.”

Harry could almost hear Uncle Vernon puffing himself up. “Now listen here!” The teenager had to admit he was a little impressed Uncle Vernon dared to roar at a full-grown witch like that. “We took the boy in and treated him as if he were our own flesh and blood! And did we complain? Not a once! We haven’t asked for a ruddy penny for the clothes we put on his back or the food he ate from our table!”

Harry nearly dropped the tin of Aunt Petunia’s good chocolate biscuits. He felt something quivering in his chest, pushing him past some edge he hadn’t realized he was standing on.

“That’s a bloody lie!” Harry yelled, storming back into the room. “You’ve never given me a bloody thing but Dudley’s castoffs and whatever scraps you could get by with!”

“Silencio!” Umbridge slashed her wand through the air, stealing Harry’s voice. The Dursleys managed to look frightened, amused and smug at the same time. “You really never learn, do you, Mr Potter? I have no reason to trust you and every reason to trust your Aunt and Uncle. Now, be a dear and fetch the tea.”

Harry stared at her in shock, his anger slowly be replaced by fear. Umbridge had provoked him again just to show him who had the power – and that she wasn’t afraid to use it. He slowly turned back around and went back into the kitchen.

I can’t let her provoke me again. There’s no telling what she’ll do.

In the silence that followed, he heard Dolores fiddle with the heavy parchment envelopes in her lap. “Like I said, just a bit of firm discipline. I know good and well you never complained, Mr Dursley. And such generosity is a sign of what kind of household Harry has grown up in. If anything, Mr Dursley, I’m afraid the boy is a bit spoiled. Which is perfectly understandable! It’s only natural to want to give more to a child who was born with so little!”

Trembling with rage, Harry poured the boiling water into the teapot. How dare they...?

Taking deep breaths, Harry picked up the tray.

“Spoiled?” Petunia’s voice cracked a bit.

“Yes. Spoiled. I’m afraid it’s a bit worse than that, though, Mrs Dursley.” Umbridge heaved an exasperated sigh. “He’s developed a bit of a pathological need for attention. He can’t seem to help but tell the most outrageous lies, even if they are obviously untrue, if they will just get him a bit of attention.”

As Umbridge shook her head and tsked under breath, Harry carried the tea service into the parlor. Harry’s stomach twisted as Vernon glared at him and mouthed: ‘We’ll talk about this later, boy.’

“Here now, just give that here, Harry.” Petunia moved to take the tea service from her nephew, but Dolores waved her back.

“Sit down, Petunia, please! A woman in your condition shouldn’t have to deal with both the stress of an ill-behaved a child and seeing to your guests. I’m just sure Harry would be delighted to serve us, now wouldn’t you, Harry?”

Gritting his teeth, Harry said nothing. What bloody condition does she have, other than an overdeveloped sense of her own importance?

Umbridge was talking to Petunia as if they were old and dear friends. “Speaking of all that, dear, when are you due?”

Petunia immediately brightened, and answered in a near-ecstatic tone of voice Harry had never heard from her before. “November twenty-first is what the doctor tells me. But Dudley was a bit early, and I’m told if one is early, the others generally are too.”

Harry nearly dropped the tea service. Aunt Petunia...pregnant?! Shaking off his astonishment, he poured tea for his aunt first, Vernon, and finally Umbridge, conveniently ‘forgetting’ a guest was always served first.

No one commented, but Petunia did shoot him a sharp glance.

How did Umbridge know that?

Vernon, if possible, puffed himself up even more. “It’s really the perfect time to have a second child, what with Dudley only going to Smeltings for another year. My boy is taking his last year off to compete, you see. He starts his serious training this summer, and will work part time at Grunnings in his off-season. He’s a boxer, you know, and he’s going to be a champion!”

Dolores shook her head in amazement. “You’ve done so well with your Dudley! How you could turn out such a fine son while raising a second child who came from an already dysfunctional family, I just don’t know. How are you going to manage a third?”

Harry was reeling. His aunt was Pregnant and Dudley was going to start training seriously as a boxer?

Well, at least that makes sense. What else could the fat ape really do with his life? Not that I've got all that many more options.

Vernon scoffed. "My cousin Veronica has moved in with us. She's the former Governess to the Countess Elemindreda's four girls and will be taking up a teaching position at a parochial school next term, but only part time."

Dolores smiled, and it almost looked genuine as she handed Vernon one of the envelopes. "None the less, the Minister hopes this will help with some of your expenses, remodeling or paying for your son's training."

Vernon practically snatched the envelope out of her hands, and tore it open right there. He looked between the check and Umbridge several times before handing it to Petunia. His face looked like he couldn't decide to be gleeful or suspicious, but end result made him look like a man trying not to giggle like a schoolgirl.

Petunia laughed nervously, swatting at Vernon's hands until he put the check down. "It is certainly generous..."

"Nothing more than you deserve, I'm sure." Dolores said, waving at hand at Petunia's protest. "Now, on to less pleasant matters."

Vernon tried his best to look stern and attentive. "The boy?"

Harry's skin crawled, and he suddenly understood what was going on here. The Ministry just bribed the Dursleys into doing what Fudge wants.

Dolores nodded. "Yes. 'The boy', as you so eloquently put it. Some rather misguided people from our community have taken a rather special and unwarranted interest in him, and from what I hear, threatened you. Part of why I am here is to assure you the Ministry will deal with this self-styled 'Order of the Phoenix'."

Her voice was grim and sharp, and Harry shrank back, sitting against the far wall. Petunia met his eyes and smiled knowingly. Vernon looked positively gleeful.

Umbridge turned to look at Harry, once again staring right at him, making sure he paid attention. "You see, a civic-minded individual from the so-called 'Order' has given us some much-needed information. Despite the Ministry's best efforts, the boy has been involved in things he has no business being involved in."

Harry froze. Someone from the Order talked to the Ministry? He remembered Umbridge's interrogations all too well, though. Veritaserum and even the Cruciatus Curse. Maybe they didn't have a choice.

"This new information has given the Ministry what it needs to keep Mr Potter safely out of events he has no business being involved in." She turned away from Harry to smile at Vernon. "But Mr Dursley, the Ministry finds it must impose upon you for one small thing."

Vernon looked at the envelope Petunia was holding. "We'd be happy to help, of course." He sneered. "Anything to keep the dear boy safe."

Umbridge nodded. "Thank you Mr Dursley. All we ask is you and your wife keep the boy out of the way. Do whatever you need to do to reign in his tendency to be where he shouldn't and involve himself in things he has no business being involved in. Perhaps even teach him to keep silent instead of speaking, especially when he knows he would be telling a lie."

She looked directly at Harry as she said the last.

"Mr Dursley," Umbridge turned her eyes back to Vernon, meeting his eyes "He must not have contact with the wizarding world this summer. None at all." Her voice fell to a whisper. "Nothing else matters, Vernon. Nothing you have to do will matter. It is imperative that Harry Potter spends the summer without any contact with or from our world. He must be isolated. Knowing what a...difficult...child he can be, no one from the Ministry will look askance at anything you do to maintain

control of the situation. And if you do this for us, Mr Dursley, the Ministry will be very, very grateful to you."

She handed Vernon a second envelope. Vernon didn't open this one. He tucked into his suit jacket with a quiet nod, but there was a disturbing anticipation in his eyes.

"Oh, I'm sure we can help. Just positive it won't be a problem."

Dolores smiled. "I'm pleased to hear that, Mr Dursley. Very pleased."

She walked over to Harry and dropped the last envelope in his lap. "Open it, Mr Potter."

Harry felt a moment's hot resentment, but he held his tongue and opened the letter.

It was in dark blue ink, written in elegant handwriting scrawled across the heavy, expensive parchment used by the Ministry.

An Official Decree of the Ministry Of Magic of the United Kingdom

In this, a time of impending war against the Dark Forces, Cornelius Fudge, elected Minister of Magic, does by executive writ hereby declare by illegal all Associations, Orders, Lodges, Fraternities, Sororities, and other organizations of Wizards and/or Witches not officially sanctioned by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement of the Ministry of Magic.

By My Hand and Seal

Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic

Numbly, Harry looked up at Umbridge. She smiled down at him, knowing he understood what it meant.

They did it. They broke the Order.

She knelt beside him, her hot breath condensing on his cheek as she whispered. Her fingers rested on the dragonhide covered scar.

"All you had to do was keep your mouth shut. Play by the rules. But you couldn't, could you? Now you understand. You should never have challenged the Ministry, Mr Potter."

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The door closed behind Umbridge.

Harry distantly heard the sharp crack! as Umbridge Apparated away. He felt the spell lift as she vanished.

Vernon turned away from the door, looking up at the ceiling, and bellowed: "Dudley! Downstairs, now!"

Dudley came down the stairs, his heavy tread shaking the staircase. Uncle Vernon loomed over Harry, glaring down at his nephew as if daring Harry to speak. The Boy Who Lived said nothing.

Harry wanted to laugh; he could taste the hysteria, a sublime madness pushing at the back of his throat.

How is this any different? The Order didn't come when I was a child. They left me rot. Why wouldn't they do it again? How is this any different?

Sirius would have come. Sirius would have come, if he had known the danger Harry was now in. Sirius would have come and stayed with Harry at Number Four, Privet Drive, until Dumbledore's blood magics once again protected him from Lord Voldemort.

But they don't protect me, do they? He still finds ways to get at me, to hurt me.

Sirius Black was dead. The Order of the Phoenix was broken. His friends would never know what was happening. Harry was alone.

Gleefully, Vernon put an arm around Dudley's shoulders. "Well, Dudders, it looks like we were right about the boy after all! A good for nothing liar no one wants!"

Laughing, Vernon sneered at Harry. "I told you, boy, that this summer is going to be different, didn't I?" Without giving Harry a chance to answer, Vernon pushed Dudley towards his cousin, roaring at Harry. "You earn your keep this time! Dudley's been accepted to a prestigious training program for future champions. And you, boy, will go with him every morning." He jabbed a finger towards Harry, practically panting for air as he yelled. "You will fetch his towels, his water. You will mop his brow and do his laundry and be glad of the chance!"

Harry struggled to his feet as Dudley stared at his father in shock.

"But...no! He can't come with me! He'll ruin it! I won't be able to train with him watching me!"

Vernon spat his next words. "He'd better not keep you from training! And I can't hardly have him here, Dudley! Your mother is pregnant, and I won't have him getting her so much as a glass of water! I will not allow his...freakishness to taint our child! We kept it from infecting you, and by god I won't let him do it to the baby!"

Vernon's face was dark red with fury, his body trembling as he jabbed his finger into Harry's chest.

"Do you hear me, boy? Don't go near your aunt, not for anything! Your Ministry wrote me boy, told me she was coming for you! They'll keep those freaks away from us, boy. They aren't coming for you. You're mine this summer. You get me, boy?"

Harry's voice was calm even as his throat bubbled with something between a laugh and a sob.

"I understand, Uncle Vernon."

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It was pitch black inside the cupboard under the stairs.

Harry could hear Hedwig sleeping quietly. His eyes stared into the darkness.

He was alone. Ron and Hermione had proven last summer they wouldn't come for him if Dumbledore told them not to. The Order no longer existed.

Behind closed eyes, images – memories – he had fought long and hard to push into tiny compartments in his mind flashed through his thoughts like a grade-school filmstrip. Snape's Occlumency lessons had broken down the walls in his mind, and now everything could come through.

Harry swore he heard Snape's voice, harsh, sneering the curse; the Potions Master had become his own private Dementor.

"Legilimens!"

... Sirius taunting Bellatrix; his grinning face framed by dark hair, something fierce, unnamable in his eyes. "Is that all you've got?"

...Sirius, falling through the Veil. Ron, screaming as the brain attacked him.

...Hermione, falling under Dohlov's curse.

...Ginny, limping under his arm, her face a mask of determination, biting her lip in concentration, red hair raining down around her face in a cascade of brilliant copper. She and she alone had known what he had really come to seek – but neither had said a word...

...Neville, standing beside Harry to the last, refusing to fall.

Harry tried to clear his head, to stop remembering that moment; instead, he remembered Dumbledore's dynamic, dramatic duel with the Dark Lord.

I need to learn. To fight like that, to fight him like that.

He heard a soft rapping at the door.

The slit his Uncle had installed years ago to watch and berate him through opened, and he met his Aunt's eyes. For the first time, he noticed how similar they were to his mother's, only bright gray instead of bright green. The cheekbones were the same; the forehead was different.

He suddenly knew Petunia hated Lily Potter the same way Snape hated James – jealousy and rivalry gone too far. Had his mother done to Petunia what James and Sirius had done to Snape? Did his mother – hence, him – deserve her hate?

He thought of another pair of gray eyes and blond hair. Am I the same, because of what I do to Draco Malfoy?

For the first time the thought he might be like his father chilled him.

"I won't let you or those people ruin this for Dudley. He's not been the same since last summer. Write them and make them stay away, or by whatever you hold dear, boy, you will pay."

The slit slammed shut.

Harry calmly screwed in the single light bulb – the cupboard's only illumination – into its socket and watched it flicker to life; he opened his trunk and pulled out parchment, quill, and his favorite emerald ink.

At first, he wasn't sure what to write, or who to write to. He didn't have the words.

But he wrote anyway. First to the order; just a few words.

I'm here. I'm alive. They're feeding me and leaving me be.

That was a lie. Before, it had always been a half-truth, but this time, it was a lie. He could almost feel the pain of Umbridge's blood-quill searing his hand as he wrote the words: "I must not tell lies." He gripped his quill tighter, feeling the scar under the dragonhide glove.

He scratched out the words he had written and started again.

I'm here. I'm alive. They might even feed me. Professor Umbridge came today. She showed me Fudge's announcement that the Order has been disbanded. She gave the Dursleys money to keep from the wizarding world this summer. What does that mean for me, here? My Aunt's pregnant and somehow Umbridge knew it.

Something is different this summer. I might be safe from Voldemort here, but I'm not safe from the Ministry or the Dursleys.

What else to write? What to tell Ron and Hermione? Was there any way to tell them? He felt like they deserved to hear something from him.

He wrote quietly for several hours. Letters to Ron, Hermione, Luna, Neville, Ginny, and Dumbledore, the rest of the Weasleys, even Snape and the Order of the Phoenix piled up on his cot.

And by the time he was done, he realized he could never send most of them. What he had written would not be received well.

He picked up the few he felt he could send and addressed them. Some of the words hurt once they were on paper, made real by being stated, but he knew it was necessary. He would not make the same mistakes again.

Softly stroking Hedwig's silken feathers, he pulled his owl close to his chest, listening to her hoot softly, taking comfort in her presence. A living, breathing reminder of the world he was born to.

He tied the letters to her leg, his voice a bare whisper.

"Don't come back to me here. Come find me when I'm someplace else. You can stay with Ron and Ginny. But don't come back to Privet Drive."

She nipped his hand reproachfully.

“Please, Hedwig.” His head fell and his eyes closed. How could he be strong enough to save the entire world when he couldn’t look his own pet in her eyes? “Just go. Be safe.”

She hooted softly again and Harry smiled. “Good girl.”

He slipped out of the closet, long years of practice making his movements soundless. He snuck his way into the kitchen, where his Aunt always had a window open to catch wind of the latest gossip. He saw the dark sky shaded with hints of light from the cloud-obscured moon and realized how late it was. Maybe Uncle Vernon had gone to bed.

Hedwig leapt from his arm into the air. Harry smiled. She was free. It was done; he was alone now.

“Boy! What are you doing out of your cupboard?”

Harry turned to face his Uncle’s purple face, something inside him becoming strangely still. He met Vernon’s eyes and smiled; something passed between them and Vernon knew as surely as Harry did. There were no watchers. There was no Order of the Phoenix. There was only Harry, and Vernon.

“You sent that bird without telling me?”

Harry nodded. “Yes sir, I did.”

Vernon loomed over him. Despite his Uncle’s anger, Harry felt the stillness and silence. There was no chaos or confusion in his mind.

Vernon pulled off his belt with slow deliberation.

“That showed a sad lack of respect, boy.”

End Chapter

CHAPTER THREE

Dreaming of You

Ginny Weasley was home from Hogwarts.

She was home, but she didn't feel any different.

She got ready for bed the same way she always had. She took her shower and put on her nightshirt, her long red hair wrapped up in a towel a bit less fluffy and a bit more ragged than it used to be. Her Hogwarts uniform joined the rest of the dirty clothes in the badly abused hamper in the corner of the cluttered bathroom; she brushed her teeth with the Muggle toothpaste Hermione's parents had sent her for Christmas.

She went into her room - a room she'd spent less and less time in since her eleventh birthday. A room stuck between belonging to a simple little girl and a complex young woman. Bare walls of dark green jewel tones mottled and dappled together in that way only faux finishing by hand could create. Her bed was pale white wood adorned with flowery scrollwork dusted with pastel pink and pale yellow highlights.

She threw the towel to the thin carpet and slid between sheets patterned with a smorgasbord of butterflies and dragonflies and chubby little dragons, wondering why she wasn't any different.

Something should be different.

She had gone with them this time; faced danger and been part of the adventure. She'd held her own against the Bad Guys, at least as much as any of them had, except Harry. Her mother was beside herself with worry, and her father was quietly proud of her. And she had finally struck back against the taunting voice in the dark that hadn't left her alone since her first year at Hogwarts.

It had felt good. She'd felt vibrant, alive – and in those brief hours of tension and fear and violence, she had not been alone.

But nothing has changed. We came back from the Department of Mysteries and nothing was different. Nothing is the same, but nothing is different.

It was a subtle thing, being alone. A quiet, creeping grayness that blurred the edges of the world the more you lived in it. It was insidious in that once it began, it was hard to stop.

It had started her first year – how could she make friends while under the control of a Dark Wizard thought long vanquished? In the years after, how could anyone be friends with the quiet girl who might be capable of turning around and killing them?

Her brothers treated it alternately as a joke or an excuse to be overprotective of ‘little Ginny’. The threat of the twins pranking anyone who would be her friend, combined with Ron being Harry’s friend made her all-but-untouchable.

Unless you’re a boy who wants a kiss and cuddle to brag about!

Michael Corner had proven that. Dean Thomas wasn’t much better – although he didn’t know that she knew – she knew he was dating her because Seamus Finnegan had told him he couldn’t handle a redhead.

I should show them both why they should be afraid of redheads!

But she wouldn’t. Just like Luna wouldn’t lash out at her housemates who stole her things, she wouldn’t lash out at the boys who used her. If she did, even that much acceptance might be gone.

She shivered a bit, letting herself wish for just one moment, that just one thing had changed. But it hadn’t.

Ginny Weasley blew out her candle and pulled the covers over her head.

She never had any trouble falling asleep; it seemed as soon as she closed her eyes she was drifting off.

But the dreams were always waiting for her.

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...Harry's eyes. Burning green.

A cold laugh.

A voice. She knew that voice. Warm. Open. Accepting.

A seductive lie. A beautiful truth.

Whispering to Harry.

"...and you will take your proper place at my side..."

Flicker.

... It was a beautiful house, really. Dark wood; classically designed, seamlessly melding the baby-boomer era with the modern times in an architectural statement of refined and understated elegance.

She was standing in the kitchen.

Harry was sitting at the table.

His back was to her; he didn't seem to know she was there. But the dreams were the only times she was ever alone with him.

She took a step closer, her bare feet shuffling over the painfully clean linoleum, and she saw him clearly; he was shirtless, and his pale skin was marred with long red welts, swollen and puffy. Some were oozing blood.

"Harry?" She asked, not sure she trusted her eyes; her voice was a whisper that seemed to echo around the room, as if speaking made the dream itself vibrate with the sound.

He turned around and looked at her. Ginny gasped.

His face was dark and swollen. Black circles around his eyes. He clenched his fist; she saw he was wearing the black, fingerless glove she had given him – only he didn't know she was the one who had left it on his bed.

"Ginny?" He asked softly, surprised to see her, not believing it was her.

"It's me." Ginny looked away from him and tugged at her nightshirt, wishing she'd worn more to bed. Or less. She was too confused about the dreams to really know what she wanted from them anymore.

He shifted in his chair and looked at her. His eyes were dull, lifeless.

She hadn't seen any life in his eyes since coming back from the Department of Mysteries. Since Sirius had died. She missed it. She missed him.

She took a step closer and reached for him.

Harry scooted the chair back.

Ginny pulled her hand back, swallowing her sudden tears. Even here, in her dreams, she wasn't allowed to touch him, to be a part of his world.

She could deal with that. He usually wasn't like that in the dreams, only in the real world. But if she could deal with it there, she could deal with it here.

"So, this is where you live?"

He shrugged.

"Yeah."

"It's nice. Elegant." Ginny ran her fingertips over the real wood molding.

"I suppose it is." Harry almost smiled, his eyes looking at the kitchen as if seeing it for the first time. "I don't know if Aunt Petunia would be pleased or horrified a witch called her house 'elegant'."

Ginny tried to force herself to smile at his weak sally. He hugged himself, shivering.

"You've got to be colder than I am," he said. "Come on, I'll turn on the heat."

He stood and turned towards her, looking like he might reach out for her.

How could he be cold? She was almost uncomfortably warm, and all she was wearing was her thin cotton nightshirt.

"I'm not cold." She took another small step towards him. He flinched, but he didn't pull away. "I'm kinda warm, actually."

He was still shivering. "I'm freezing. How can you be warm? I've never known Aunt Petunia to keep things so cold."

She reached out again, her hand moving without any conscious thought. He froze, but didn't pull away. His lifeless eyes watched her hand as her fingertips brushed the bare skin of his chest.

His skin was smooth and cool with only the barest hint of warmth, of life. She could feel his pulse under her fingertips, slow and steady but doing nothing to pump warmth into him.

He gasped at the contact, his hand reaching up to grasp hers, pressing it to him. "You're so warm...it's always cold in my dreams. Except you. You're always warm."

Another tiny step closing the distance between them. "Always? Do you remember other dreams of me?"

Her voice was light, teasing.

He shook his head, raking his free hand through his unruly hair. "I think so. I don't know. Maybe it was you...maybe it was my mother." He smiled slightly, the first real, full expression he'd shown. "She had red hair...not as dark or as long as yours."

His hand went from his hair to hers, running down the edges of it.

She shivered, but not from the cold. How could she ever really give up on him when she dreamed of him like this?

Every summer since the Chamber, she had dreamed of him.

She desperately wanted the dreams to be real.

His hand tightened on hers, as if to make sure she was still there.

"I hope it was you." He said, and it was her turn to be surprised. "You're alive, despite everything I've failed to do."

He let go of her hand, and turned away. Her arm stayed where it was, and her fingertips grazed his skin as he moved.

"You can't...you don't..." The idea was too much to bear. "Your parents' dying was not your fault. Neither was Sirius, or Cedric."

He took a step away, and whirled back to face her. This time his eyes were alive, jade burning with impotent rage.

"Yes! My fault! I killed them, just as surely as I killed Cedric, as I killed Sirius! Because I was born! Because I'm the bloody Boy Who Lived!" He stopped, and tried to reign himself in. "A dream. A dream doesn't matter, does it?" He seemed to be talking to himself.

A dream only matters when someone dies because of it.

It was his thought, but they both heard it.

"They died because of Tom!" Ginny was still whispering, but her voice sounded more like it always did.

“No, Ginny.” Harry pulled back into himself, withdrawing from her, from the dream. “They died because of me. Because I’m not strong enough.”

He was hugging himself again.

She walked closer again, reaching out to touch his face, his arms, his shoulders, hoping some of her warmth would seep into him. Her fingers traced over his cold skin, finally coming to rest on a bruise.

“Who did that?”

He halfway turned away from her, reluctant to pull away from her touch, but not wanting her to see his face. “No one. It’s nothing. These things just happen.”

The words fell flat. They were lies, and they both knew it.

He winced and jerked forward, holding his hand to his scar.

As one, their eyes fell on the open window. Outside, there was a pair of blood-red eyes glowing in the darkness.

Those red eyes bored into her, and she felt a breeze ripple over her, carrying the hissing syllables of Parseltongue.

Harry straightened and faced her, looking very sad, as if he were about to give up something he never thought he would lose. His voice was deep and quiet; there was a quality about it that reminded her of Dumbledore, or her father.

“It’s not safe in my dreams, Ginny. You shouldn’t be here where he can see you.”

Ginny started, and blinked at him. “What?”

Your dream? She silently asked him. This is my dream.

Harry sighed. “Ginny, you shouldn’t be here. Voldemort will see you.”

She closed the distance between them, staring into his green eyes; they seemed somehow brighter, almost glowing.

Her fingertips rested against his chest.

She saw it in his eyes. He didn't want to give up the dream anymore than she did.

His face was set in fierce lines of determination. He was going to send her away.

He was all too aware of what dreams had cost him.

"I can't let him see you here."

Ginny saw the pain etched on his face. Emotional scars his dream-self would never lose. She reached out with a hand and cupped his bruised cheek, wanting to take some of that pain with her.

He smiled and leaned against her hand. He reached out and touched her face gently.

"It's time to wake up, Ginny."

There was a flash of light.

Flicker.

"Harry, no!"

Ginny snapped awake with a gasp, reaching out for one last chance to touch him, but her hand found empty air. Sucking in air, Ginny sat up, blinking away the tears.

He was hurt. He's never been hurt in the dreams before.

She remembered the red eyes watching them; the red eyes of Voldemort – the Dark Lord who had once been a boy named Tom Riddle.

Okay, Ginny. Think about this logically. The simplest explanation is you had a nightmare. The dream wasn't real. You were angsty like a Slytherin drama-queen before bed. Of course your dreams are going to be bad.

She slipped out of bed and opened her window, letting the cool night air in.

It had to be a nightmare. Because if the dream was real that means either I was in Harry's dream...or Voldemort can see into my dreams.

Her mouth was suddenly dry; it was one of her deepest, most private fears. That the connection between her and Tom Riddle still existed – and the Dark Lord could still touch her.

If the dream was real...

Part of her ached for that to be true, for Harry to have reached out for her like that, even in what he thought was a dream.

If it was real, then Voldemort really saw me there. Saw Harry...and saw that he was hurt. And if it was real, then Harry was really hurt.

For the first time since her first 'Harry dream', Ginny wanted the dream to be nothing more than a dream.

She sat there for a time, staring into the darkness. She didn't want to go back to sleep. She didn't want to dream again, and at the same time she desperately wanted the dream to come back.

So she did what any insomnia-ridden Weasley would do: she went downstairs to the kitchen to make tea. Her bare feet were silent on the stairs. All of the Weasley children had mastered the knack of walking down the rickety staircase without it creaking or moaning, and with an ease born of lifelong habit, she set about making herself a cup of tea in the dark. The time it took the water to heat felt like both a brief second and an eternity, but before too long she was carrying a mug of hot tea with her to the couch, to sit in front of the fire her father never let go out – the Burrow was currently the Order's makeshift headquarters, and the floo had to be constantly accessible.

She stared at the fire as she sat down on the couch – and onto something warm and soft that made a surprised ‘oompf’ sound.

“Gerrof! Uh, can’t a girl get any sleep around here?”

Ginny jumped away with a muted squeal nearly sloshing tea onto her hands.

Tonks sat up, blinking and rubbing sleep from her eyes. “This is an ungodly hour to be awake, Ginny-girl.”

Glaring at Tonks, Ginny put her free hand on her hip. “And just what are you doing sleeping on the couch?”

Looking abashed, Tonks gave a self-conscious shrug. “Er, well, nothing, really, just stealing a night’s sleep, you know, came in off my shift buggered out and all that.”

Ginny let out a breath very slowly. “I really wish everyone would stop acting like I’m stupid. You were here watching the floo and you fell asleep.”

If she was wrong, Tonks didn’t try to correct her. With another sigh, Ginny waved a hand at her. “Go back to sleep.”

She sat down on a cushy armchair almost big enough for Hagrid, curling up like a cat, holding her mug in both hands.

The Order has someone sleeping on the couch. Someone to guard our house.

Ginny felt a tingle of fear creep through her, coiling in her stomach, an icy lump she couldn’t make go away with all the hot tea in the world.

She had been wrong, earlier. Everything had changed, and it would never be the same again.

Harry sat and stared into the darkness. Could the darkness around him eat everything he was feeling? Could he feed it the fear, the pain?

Maybe that's what Voldemort did. He fed the darkness with himself until it took the place of what he fed it.

He didn't understand why Ginny Weasley had appeared in his dream. In some ways, he knew they should understand each other. She, like him, had stared true evil in the face and turned back around to tell everyone else what it looked like.

He had become increasingly aware of that connection since she had reminded him of it that past Christmas.

Only he had no idea what it might mean; what they could do for each other.

But it wasn't the first dream he'd had of Ginny. He'd dreamt of her more than a few times after Christmas, almost always a day or so after an Occlumency lesson with Snape.

That part made sense; he felt his lessons with Snape had ripped his mind open instead of closing it. Rescuing Ginny from the Chamber had created a magical connection between them; it was also when he first began to see the connections between himself and Voldemort. It made sense she would become a face of his subconscious – he sometimes thought she expressed the subconscious of Gryffindor house itself. She always seemed to understand which way the current was moving, how people were feeling, reacting.

But there were other things he didn't understand. Why he had felt warm when she touched him? Why he hadn't he wanted her to move her hand...or why it had been so hard to send her away.

He knew even if he wanted to explore the connection between them, he couldn't.

Lord Voldemort could see into his mind, and it was far too dangerous for any of his friends to appear in his dreams. Or too often in his thoughts.

Harry clasped his wand in his hand; it was an empty comfort, but it was at least something.

I should have tried harder to master Occlumency. I have to find a way to clear my mind and keep Voldemort outside my thoughts.

He sat and stared into the darkness, and knew he would have to be careful how much he slept this summer.

End Chapter

LETTERS I

Ginny was almost ready to go back to bed when Hedwig hooted from her window.

She knew it was Hedwig without even looking. Most owls sounded the same to Ginny, but Hedwig had always sounded clearer, almost as if she were 'enunciating' better.

Ginny opened her window, letting Hedwig fly in and deposit an envelope in her hands before perching on her nightstand.

Her first name was written in green ink on the front of the envelope.

"Is this from Harry?" Ginny asked the owl, gingerly cradling the letter.

Hedwig hooted emphatically, and fluffed her wings a bit.

Trying to convince herself she wasn't excited about getting a letter from Harry, she opened the envelope and unfolded the parchment and noticed there was something heavy spellotaped to the back.

Ginny,

I don't know how to write to you – well, okay, that didn't make any sense. It's more that I don't know what to say to you. And it feels like there should be something for me say. At least, more than just 'hey, thanks for risking your life for me.'

There's a part of me that wants to think of you as just my best mate's kid sister. Only, you're not. You're not 'just' anything, and anyone who thinks of you like that, especially me, is doing you a disservice.

So, I'm sorry. I won't think of you like that anymore.

You were right at Christmas, you know. You're the only one who can understand what it feels like to doubt yourself, to wonder if you did something horrible – or were something horrible. Or just maybe, might have to become something horrible. You went through your own personal hell in the Chamber.

Ginny, I'm sorry I forgot. Of all the stupid, insensitive things I did last year, I regret that the most. All I can do is promise you I won't forget again. Tom has marked you, like he has marked me. The scar isn't as visible, but I know it's there. No matter what else happens, he will always know you – just like he will always know me.

I think there's still more to say, but I'm running out of words. I don't know you, not really. I don't understand how it happened, but I don't know you. I somehow even managed to get to know Luna, but I never got to know you. I'm sorry – and I'd like to fix that once I get out of there for the summer. There are a lot of things I'm going to do when I get out of here for the summer – but getting to know you is top of the list. If I learned one thing last year, it's that I cannot take any of my friends for granted. I'm even trying not to take the Dursleys for granted.

I think you'd be a little surprised at how I'm being treated this time. Even Uncle Vernon agrees things will be different this. I'm allowed out of the house every day, even if I do have to help Dudley practice his boxing. Uncle Vernon doesn't want me around Aunt Petunia while she's pregnant. As if being magical were catching.

Uncle Vernon's cousin Veronica has moved in to help take care of Petunia, and she seems to be thrilled I'm learning how to be Dudley's personal trainer. It means I get fewer chores, but I have to spend all my time with Dudley. But it's better than it could be, and I'm glad for it.

If you're bored, write me back. Maybe I won't have to wait until I get out of here to start getting to know you.

Harry Potter

P.S. I'm sending Hedwig to stay with you this summer. Uncle Vernon really hates her and I don't want her to be cooped up this summer. I've sent my Gringotts key with her so you can get money to pay for anything she needs.

Harry had written her a letter. Not only that, but he'd entrusted her with Hedwig and his Gringotts key. Which she now realized was what was taped to the back of the letter.

She felt her old self-doubt float to the surface, forcing her to ask: Why me? Why not Ron or Hermione?

She could rationalize it away easily enough. Hermione was having some kind of family reunion and no could send her any letters. Ron had Pig. That left her and gave her an owl she could use to write back to him. Harry knew her family didn't have much money (not that he would expect anyone to pay so much as a knut on his behalf), so sending his Gringotts key to whoever took care of Hedwig made sense.

She would be lying if she said she didn't like the idea of Harry wanting her to write him, of Harry wanting to get to know her. She also knew better than to read anything into the gesture other than friendship. For all she knew, he had sent similar letters to Luna and Neville, wanting to get to know them better.

But something still didn't make sense. She knew there was something she was missing.

Did he choose me because of the dream? She shook her head. That didn't make any sense either, because he would have had to have sent Hedwig before she had even gone to bed.

His letter had been more serious and more open than he'd ever been with her, as if he were trying to say things while he had the chance to say them. Then she realized it wasn't that Harry had sent Hedwig to her, it was that he'd send Hedwig – and his key - at all.

He'd kept her at the Dursleys' before, even when she was cooped up, and even with their financial difficulties, the Weasley's could easily support an Owl for the summer.

Maybe he just didn't want it to happen again or maybe he was worried after she'd been injured last year?

It struck her that Harry had a habit of sending people he cared about away from danger. He would send Hedwig away if he - and therefore her – were in danger.

The second realization struck her. He wants his Gringott's key accessible if something happens to him.

Ginny pulled out quill, parchment and her favorite purple ink. She would write him back. And she'd find a way to make him tell her what was going on.

She had to.

End Chapter

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Order of the Phoenix

The only thing that travels faster than rumors is bad news.

One by one, they made their way to the Burrow to find out if the whispers everyone seemed to be hearing were rumors or bad news. Rumors could be dealt with, even used to their advantage. Bad news meant the Order was fighting a war on two fronts.

One by one, the Order of the Phoenix arrived until there were too many of them to be contained in the Burrow's kitchen, and they spilled out onto the porch and into the yard. They were teachers and former students, Aurors and ministry officials, reporters and spies, magical creatures and squibs.

The first morning of summer vacation, Ron and Ginny were the only two people at the Burrow who were not members of the Order. As such, Professor Snape (who thought it safer to not know what the Order discussed) escorted them to breakfast at the Leaky Cauldron.

Albus Dumbledore, Mad-Eye Moody and Bill Weasley set wards around the Burrow; Aurors and house-elves searched every inch of the Weasley's property and pronounced it safe.

A long table, complete with comfortable padded chairs, was conjured in the front yard. House-elves loyal to Dumbledore provided refreshment, much to Molly Weasley's outspoken dismay.

Early in the morning hours, the Order of the Phoenix convened.

Seated at the head of the table, Dumbledore waited for the murmur of voices to quiet before he stood and smiled.

"Welcome, all of you. It is always a joy to see one's colleagues so pro-active as to call and attend a meeting without the formalities of sending around a memo."

There were a few smiles, but the tense anticipation killed the weak humor as if it had been struck by Avada Kedavra.

“Today is an auspicious day.” Dumbledore spread his hands wide. “It is the first day of summer vacation for Hogwarts’ students and staff. Many of our more prominent members are now far freer to act. And, I fear, we will sorely need their time and skills.”

Dumbledore rested his hands on the table. “It is true. Cornelius Fudge has already reneged on the agreement he made the night of the attack on the Department of Mysteries. Through an act of law, he has ordered us disbanded and declared the Order itself illegal. Those of you who wish to respect this decree are free to leave and do as you will. No one here will stop you.”

Dumbledore sat, and waited. Long minutes of silence drug on before one of the Weasley twins ended it.

“You know none of us agree with that windbag! Get on with the plan, already!”

There were a few chuckles, even though Molly glared at the twins, but the tension had broken.

“The plan, Misters Weasley, is very simple. We no longer have official recognition or support, eliminating any legitimate means to obtain money and support beyond what we can provide to ourselves.”

Mundungus Fletcher puffed on his foul-smelling pipe. “Which means, ladies n’ gents, that we acquire ourselves some less than strictly legitimate means, right Albus?”

“Indeed, Mundungus. That is precisely what I propose. But first, we must address the larger issue of Cornelius Fudge. He is proving a greater threat than we imagined.”

Tonks leaned back in her chair and swung her booted feet up onto the table. “He sure moved fast. Got that Decree out and Dolores

Umbridge back to work before the sun set yesterday. I saw her paying a visit to 4 Privet Drive last afternoon.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes. The Minister moved with remarkable speed and efficiency. In the hours between his parting with me and the train’s arrival at King’s Cross, Fudge has managed to wrest control of Harry from us.”

Bill and Tonks shared a look. They had been the ones to get the Owl from Harry telling them what Umbridge had done. They’d sent it on to Dumbledore, of course, but it was starting to look like there was nothing they could do to help him without going head-to-head with the Ministry.

There was a clamor of voices as everyone tried to speak, but the sound of something large and heavy being slammed against the table caused a startled silence.

“And just how,” Molly Weasley stood, her eyes ablaze, “did he manage to do that? And just what does that mean for Harry?”

Demonstrating remarkable prudence, the other members of the Order decided to remain quiet and avoid getting between Molly and Dumbledore.

“Cornelius Fudge has issued me an ultimatum.” He held out his hand, and a scroll floated from his sleeve to Molly’s hands. “If ‘my supporters’ and ‘those affiliated with me’ do not leave Harry Potter alone, up to and including ceasing surveillance of 4 Privet Drive, then Cornelius will declare Harry Potter a legal Ward of the State and install him in a Ministry-run orphanage for troubled youths. He sent Dolores Umbridge to Privet Drive to inform the Dursleys they are safe from our interference.”

Molly was speechless for a long moment; the scroll crumpled in her hand, and she dropped it to the ground.

“I am sorry, Molly. I am sorrier than you can know.” Dumbledore shook his head. “But we cannot do anything for Harry other than follow the Minister’s order. We cannot risk him being taken from 4

Privet Drive too early. Nor can we risk too much attention falling on his presence there. However, one member of the Order will continue to keep an eye on Harry, under the utmost secrecy.” Dumbledore nodded at Tonks. The (currently) pink-haired Auror nodded back.

“Unacceptable,” Molly spat. “When can we remove him from that place, Albus? When he’s as twisted as You-Know-Who? Or when those Muggles have hurt him so badly we can’t fix it? We seem to be putting everything on the shoulders of one boy that we leave to be tormented by people who hate him, when there are those of us who would gladly give him a home and a family!”

A few members of the Order had the good grace to look uncomfortable with what Molly said. But most of the Order simply looked impassive or openly glared at her.

Dumbledore held up his hand, looking old and tired and worn. “Molly. Enough. The decision is made and I will brook no interference.”

Molly nodded sharply, stood, and pushed in her chair. Standing behind it, she looked at Albus Dumbledore. “You may be a great teacher. A great wizard and even a great man, but you are a lousy father.”

With that, she turned and stormed away.

Dumbledore did not give her final sally time to linger. “We must work carefully to undermine Fudge’s authority and ability to censor our activities. Our first step is to seek aid outside the Ministry.”

He looked around the table, meeting the eyes of each member in turn. “Two years ago, we began the process of forging deeper bonds between our Ministry and other nations. I believe it is now time to capitalize on those connections created during the Tri-Wizard Tournament.”

Minerva McGonagall pursed her lips. “Seek aid from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons?” She shook her head. “Beauxbatons has always been an ally of the light, Albus, but Durmstrang? They have a long history of involvement with the Dark Arts.”

Mad Eye grunted. “Minerva’s right. We’d have to speak to each potential recruit and assess them. There aren’t many of us who can do that, even with the ‘extra time’ you’re gloating about.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Indeed. You are both correct, which brings me to another matter we must address. As skilled and dedicated as our membership may be, we lack certain skills and perspectives that others we have overlooked possess – such as an uncanny ability to spot Dark Wizards.”

“You’re talking about our students, aren’t you?” Professor Vector sighed. “I know it’s inevitable, but Albus...”

“Stuff it,” Moody growled. “Most of those kids are involved whether we like it or not. Albus, who did you have in mind?”

“One, for the immediate future. I intend for her to accompany Minerva to Durmstrang. There are many, many others I anticipate joining our ranks before the upcoming school term is over – but that is a discussion for another time.”

“It’s Hermione, isn’t it?” George Weasley interjected.

Albus Dumbledore nodded. “Very good, Mr Weasley.”

Fred snorted. “Easy call. Smartest witch I know, and the only way we’d get her to play by Order rules is to make her part of the Order. And if she follows the rules, it’s more likely Harry and Ron will.”

“Exactly so,” Dumbledore said. “Though any influence she has on Harry and Mr Weasley is an incidental benefit next to her own formidable skills.”

“What about students who are potential threats, Albus?” Kingsley Shacklebolt asked. “I know there are any number of potential Death Eaters that have already been identified, but are there others who might be loyal to Fudge or otherwise compromised?”

Albus looked from face to face, his expression growing grave and somber. The twinkle faded from his eyes.

“There is one. She is, in fact, the final piece of business for us to discuss – I shall tell you a story you may have heard before. And then, my friends, I must ask more of you than I have ever asked before.”

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Ron sullenly poked at his breakfast.

Ginny glared at her brother and glanced sidelong at Professor Snape sitting a table away from them.

“Just eat,” she whispered. “We can’t do a thing about it, so we may as well enjoy our meal.”

She understood why he was upset. She didn’t like being kept from the Order meeting any more than he did, but she had a sneaking suspicion she was more used to being out of the loop than Ron was.

“It’s just bloody well not fair.” Ron pushed his plate away. “It’s not like any of them will end up facing him, you know.” His voice was calmer than Ginny expected it to be.

“What do you mean? Dumbledore has faced him, more than once!”

“So? He’s Dumbledore.” Ron drained half his mug of pumpkin juice, and shook his head. “It won’t be me, or any of them. It’ll be Harry. Or you.”

“What are you talking about, you prat?” Ginny hissed at her brother, leaning closer to him and watching Snape to make sure the potions professor wasn’t eavesdropping on their conversation – and trying to hide the fear Ron’s statement had awakened in her. “Me? I’m not going to face Tom. Harry, yeah, I agree with. He’s already faced him. But not me.”

I can’t face him again. I’m not strong enough.

“Look, he’s only ever come after a few people, at least personally.” Ron poured himself more juice. “For some reason I can’t figure, he’s been all about killing Harry.” He paused, and swallowed hard. “And he has a part of you, remember?”

Ginny frowned, and pushed her plate up next to her brother’s. She didn’t feel like eating anymore.

“Of course I remember. Dumbledore told me at the end of term my first year, that no matter what, Tom Riddle and I would always share a part of each other. That I should be careful. So yeah, I know. But what does that have to do with who ‘faces’ him, Ron?”

“Everything. The Order is just a bunch of people desperately holding the line until someone can get strong enough to defeat him, for good. And it’ll be you, or Harry. I know it.”

Ginny shook her head. “You’re daft, Ron.”

Her brother’s blue eyes just fixed on her, and she shivered. Despite her attempt at bravado, she hugged herself.

“Am I?” He asked.

Ginny shook her head. “I had another Harry dream last night.”

Ron scooted his chair around the table to sit next to her. He was one of maybe two or three people who knew about Ginny’s ‘Harry dreams’. She’d started having them soon after Harry had rescued her from the Chamber. The dreams were the worst over the summer, but Ron and Ginny hadn’t been able to figure out why.

As quietly as she could, Ginny whispered to Ron, keeping her eyes surreptitiously on Snape. “He was in his kitchen at Privet Drive. At least, I think so. He was sitting there, and he was hurt. He was bruised all over...and,” She swallowed hard, and fell silent.

“Tell me?” Ron asked, putting a hand on her arm. She leaned against her brother, and bit her lip, trying not to cry. Not that she knew why

she wanted to cry; just that she always wanted to the morning after a Harry dream.

She tried to speak, but Ron shook his head and hugged her, letting her collect herself. He had never made her promise to tell him about the dreams, or ordered her to, or even tried to tell her how important the dreams could be. He'd always just let her work through it on her own – in this, if nothing else, Ron had been as supportive as a brother could be.

"I don't know. He sent me away. That's never happened before, not in the dreams. I think he thought Voldemort would see me. But if they're just dreams, then why would he be afraid of that? They're supposed to be my dreams, they aren't supposed to act and talk like the real Harry..."

Ginny stayed quiet for a few minutes before pushing away from Ron and wiping her eyes.

"Anyway, he sent me a letter. I wrote him back, but I don't know if he'll get it, let alone write back."

Ron started. "Harry wrote you? Already? He hasn't even written me! And what do you mean you don't know if he'll get the letter?"

"Calm down, Ron!" Ginny motioned for him to keep his voice down. "He sent Hedwig to stay with us this summer, so she wouldn't bother his Uncle."

Ron's face hardened into a grimace. "So his Uncle wouldn't hurt Hedwig, you mean."

Although Ron hadn't always told Ginny, her Harry dreams sometimes contained grains of truth that occasionally helped him figure out what was going on with Harry.

Ginny nodded. "I think so."

Ron shook his head. "Okay, that much makes sense. But why write you and not me and Hermione?"

Ginny shrugged. "I don't really know. Why not write him and ask him?"

Ron sighed. "Because I'm not sure I want to know the answer." He made a face. "Looking back, I'm not sure Hermione and I were what you'd call real supportive this last year."

Ginny frowned. "What do you mean?"

Looking uncomfortable, Ron squirmed in his chair. "He wasn't all that easy to get along with either."

"Ron." Ginny said impatiently, her voice a softer imitation of their mother. "Tell me what you mean."

Squirming in his seat, Ron shrugged. "Harry was being a right prat last year, all right? I didn't want to get yelled at every time I talked to him."

His sister huffed at him. "Oh yeah. Like you'd be in a great mood after one of your friends is killed by the resurrected arch-foe you never wanted and you talk to the magical afterimages of the parents you never knew. And if all that wasn't enough, more than half the school thought he'd gone spare or was lying to get attention until some rag printed his story. Come on, Ron you can do better than that."

Ron shook his head. "We didn't ignore him or anything like that. I just don't think we were there for him." He sighed. "Hermione was as mysterious and secretive as the Order about that interview with Rita Skeeter, but Harry went along with it even though he didn't know what was going on, and it caused Cho to break up with him."

"And you?" Ginny asked harshly. "What were doing? Playing Quidditch?"

"Yeah, sometimes. Or studying for OWLs. Or I dunno. We tried to be there for him, but I don't know if we could. I don't know that we knew how. The only time it felt like he was really a part of us was when he was teaching the DA."

"The DA was the only time anyone wanted any part of him, I think." Ginny sniffed. "You could have stood up for him against Umbridge. Or against anyone who went around saying he was crazy. Or you could have used your Prefect status to get him some privacy. You could have stood by him instead of letting him take the fall for everything!"

"The fall for what?" Ron snapped. "That fight with Malfoy? What would that have accomplished, Ginny? I tried, believe me. Standing up in the middle of Umbridge's class in Umbridge's classroom and challenging the Ministry's official line? Gotten detention with him? He didn't talk to me about anything, Ginny. Instead he acted without any kind of plan or any kind of forethought. Yeah, we do some stupid things, but we always had a plan. He always used to tell me what was going on. How could I help him if I didn't know what I needed to do? Did you want me to take points off people expressing their opinions? I could have, but that would have been real smart. Then they would have been more mad at Harry and more sure he was a liar." Ron slumped back, shaking his head. "It's not as easy as it seems."

"What's not easy?" Ginny asked, feeling – not for the first time – like hitting her brother. How could he, or anyone who claimed to be Harry's friend, dismiss what he'd been through so easily? "Being his friend? Either you're his friend and you act like it, or you're not. Why didn't you tell anyone about Umbridge's 'detentions'? She used a blood quill to carve 'I must not tell lies' into his hand. There is no spell, no potion or salve that will ever make those words go away. But you were worried about playing Quidditch hero to impress Hermione and barely noticed the fact that no one was helping him deal with any of it."

"Because he asked us not to," Ron said softly, narrowing his eyes, his face flushing red as the Weasley temper surged to the fore. "If his life was such hell, what were you doing? Off snogging Michael Corner in a broom cupboard?"

"Yes," Ginny answered quietly. "Because he won't listen to me. I'm just your 'little sister'."

"You still could have told someone about the detentions. Harry didn't ask you not to!" Ron shot back.

"No, I couldn't, because I didn't know about it until after Dumbledore was back! I learned about it from Dean Thomas when he was chatting me up!" She really didn't want to talk about Dean Thomas chatting her up, or that he knew the quickest way to get her to talk to him was to talk about Harry Potter. "Ron, he needs someone right now, desperately. Don't abandon him."

Ron paused, the color draining from his face. "This isn't about this last year, is it? This is about your dream. You're trying to get me to do something about your dream."

Ginny shrank back. "Maybe it's both."

"I'm not abandoning him, Ginny," Ron said calmly. "I don't know if how I handled things was right or not, I really don't. But I'm not abandoning him. And even if I wrote him, what makes you think he'd tell me?"

"I don't know." Ginny was hugging herself. Her Harry dreams were both a blessing and a curse; she loved having some small connection to him, but she hated what she saw and what she felt. "But...please..."

Ron looked thoughtful. "If you're this worried, maybe we should tell Dumbledore."

"No!" Ginny all but yelled. "No. I don't want to involve anyone else. What am I supposed to tell them? I'm having nightmares about Harry Potter and I think he might be in danger? They'd laugh at me." She let out a slow breath. "Besides, I don't know that they'd do anything even if they did believe me."

"Why do you say that?"

"The Order doesn't look out for him. I mean, they let him spend a year getting tortured by a woman who had sent Dementors to suck out his soul. She tried Veritaserum on him, Ron."

“So?” Ron threw back. “Snape’s been threatening that and worse for longer.”

“That exactly what I mean!” Ginny said. “It doesn’t make any sense. They let everyone have a go at him and it seems no one ever stands up for Harry!”

“No,” Ron mumbled. “It doesn’t make much sense, does it? I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t decide what to do.”

“You can write your friend a letter,” Ginny stated flatly.

Ron sighed. “I’ll see if I can think of anything to say. What’s a bloke supposed to write, anyway? ‘I’m sorry your godfather died. How’s the weather?’”

“No! Maybe. I don’t know.” Ginny put her elbows on the table and rested her head on her hands. “Just...something. To let him know he’s not alone.”

Ron looked at his little sister and shrugged, whispering too low for her to hear. “Somehow, Ginny, I think he might already know that.”

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If Molly Weasley saw the sour looks on her youngest children’s faces when Severus Snape brought them home, she probably chalked it up to them having spent over two hours in his un-chaperoned company.

What she didn’t know was that Snape had happily footed the bill and had even bought them ice cream for dessert, provided they didn’t bother him. The sour looks were actually from the fact that all three had ended up on their arses in the dust coming up the drive because some bugger had forgotten to take off a certain ward.

If her children saw the angry look on their mother’s face, they probably chalked it up to Fred and George being de facto members of the Order against her express wishes, and neither one of them wanted to face their mother when angry. It was a well-known fact around the Weasley family that when Molly Weasley was mad at

someone, everyone stayed out of her way or else they could quickly become the someone she was angry at.

If anyone had wanted to brave staying around the cramped family room, they would have seen Bill staring at Charlie and Fleur Delacour with an expression between hurt and sadness while Tonks switched between shooting Bill concerned looks and the happy couple death glares.

But none of the Weasleys were paying much attention. They all faded away to separate corners of the Burrow; or in the case of Fred, George and Arthur Weasley, they left for work post haste. No one paid very much attention to Severus Snape speaking quietly with Albus Dumbledore; it was a scene played out often at the Burrow since the death of Sirius Black.

Ginny Weasley knew that part of her should feel resentful of the Order invading her home and making it their headquarters now that they couldn't get into Grimmauld Place. But she wasn't. She knew Ron was, and she knew her parents wouldn't voice an opinion either way. Ginny found she couldn't feel resentful of the loss of something she had not had since the end of her first year at Hogwarts. She hadn't lost privacy or space of her own. Her family hadn't given her that since Tom Riddle had taken away the privacy of her own mind and body.

What she resented was the way they looked at her. Some of them regarded her with pity, others with suspicion. And so very few of them knew her. Or knew anything about her.

They greeted her with a smile or a pat on the shoulder, but most of them never stopped looking at her out of the corner of their eye. She wasn't just Arthur and Molly's only daughter, or the youngest Weasley or even a friend of Harry Potter.

She was girl who had been possessed by Voldemort.

The whispers were the worst. '...are we sure he can't control her anymore?' Followed by: 'No one's ever said how she got the diary in the first place...how do we know it was the diary at all?'

She would have gladly tuned them all out, if not for the other whispers. 'The Potter boy sent a letter...why should we protect just one boy, no matter how special he seems...more trouble than he's worth, if he cost us Ministry support...'

It was when her mother shuffled up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder as she leaned down to whisper: "Ginny, why don't you be a dear and go get yourself a bit of fresh air."

Ginny forced herself to smile at her mother. She made sure she spoke loud enough to be heard by most, if not all of the Order members crowding the bottom floor of her house. "Sure. I can write back to Harry by the pond just as well as I can in my room."

The youngest Weasley had the immense satisfaction of watching a wave of surprised expressions wash over the room starting with her own mother and ending with Severus Snape as she skipped out the back door, backpack in hand.

End Chapter

CHAPTER FIVE

Brand New Summer

Morning came at 4:30 am.

Dudley's alarm blared, and Harry sat up and stared into the darkness. Could the darkness around him eat everything he was feeling? Could he feed it the fear, the pain?

Maybe that's what Voldemort did. He fed the darkness with himself until it took the place of what he fed it.

His back and his face hurt horribly, but he ignored the pain. Summer with the Dursleys wouldn't kill him, even while Uncle Vernon had a free hand. Not having the blood protections from Voldemort just might kill him.

It had been a long time since Vernon had been this bad. Since before Hogwarts. He'd forgotten what it was like.

I guess I get to find out how much I can live through.

He dressed in silence, donning the oversize clothes as carefully as a knight donning armor. He picked up his wand; it was second nature to take it with him wherever he went. But what use would it be in the Muggle world?

CONSTANT VIGILANCE! Moody's voice barked in his head. Harry bowed his head in private shame, knowing he risked Uncle Vernon's wrath should the eleven-inch length of holly be found...but even worse should he need it.

He hid his wand by slicing a hole in one pocket with one of the paring knives they used in potions and spellotaping it to the inside of his trousers. It seemed a silly thing to do, but going into London, even Muggle London, without it made him feel helpless.

By 4:40, he was in the kitchen, following the recipe for Dudley's breakfast protein shake his aunt had laid out the night before as

carefully as he would be brewing a potion for an exam. Once the sludgy mixture was finished, Harry devoured a few pieces of bread and a glass of milk; there was no time for anything else.

At 4:55 am Dudley jogged down the stairs, vibrating the house. Clad in sweats, a headband holding his thin blond hair out of his eyes, he took the shake from Harry and downed it in a few enthusiastic – and noisy – gulps.

Harry studied Dudley; his cousin was still round-faced and massive, but now there was muscle underlying the layers of fat. He no longer waddled, but strode; his shoulders seemed to hold the bulk of him up as if he were on strings.

The diet did him good, I guess.

Dudley slammed the glass on the counter and turned away from Harry, who quickly cleaned up. Uncle Vernon came into the kitchen, dressed for work.

“Hurry up, boy! Get to the car! I won’t let you make Dudley late for his first day!”

Dudley was waiting eagerly by the car, a large duffel bag in one beefy hand.

Dudley and his Uncle somehow both fit into the front seat. Harry swore he heard the car creak when they sat down.

“Well, Dudders, maybe by the end of summer you’ll be driving your old dad to work, eh?”

Dudley laughed. “Hear that, Potter? Dad’s gonna teach me to drive.”

Harry just shrugged. Vernon looked back at him.

“Not like your kind even worry about driving like good, honest, normal folk, do you, boy?”

Harry knew better than to answer.

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The gym was obviously expensive and exclusive. It was three stories of red brick, and had the words 'McAllister's' spelled out in yellow celtic script on a green sign over steel-framed glass doors.

Uncle Vernon dropped them off outside, with a final admonition to Harry.

"Do as Dudley says, boy, or else!"

Or else.

Harry's back still stung and his face was still swollen from the last 'or else'.

No sooner had the car driven away that Dudley grabbed Harry's shoulder and spun him around. His cousin loomed over him, his small eyes searching Harry's.

"All right Potter, here it is. We go in, and you walk away from me. Hear me? Walk away. You've got no part of this. This is mine, alone. You don't watch me. You don't say a word of this to anyone. Got it?"

Harry stared at his cousin in disbelief; it was perhaps the most civil his cousin had ever been to him. He saw a surprising desperation in Dudley's eyes; it ran deep enough Harry actually felt some sympathy for him.

He nodded. "All right. I've got not part of this. I'll walk away. Just tell me when it's time to leave."

Dudley breathed a sigh of relief, and shoved Harry. "Good, Potter, good."

Harry followed Dudley in, and nearly ran into the man coming to greet his cousin. Taller than any Muggle Harry had ever seen, and broader in the shoulder, the red-haired man was a giant. Shirtless and sweaty, massive muscles heaved with each breath. He had some neck, but it

was corded with taut tendons. He looked down at Dudley with a sneer that reminded Harry of Snape.

“I hope you’re not Dursley, you great tub. I’d hate to think I’ll have to peel the fat off you before I make you a real fighter.”

He walked in a circle around Dudley, and snorted. “You are, aren’t you? Hmph. Well, then, I’ve got my work cut out for me. Drop your bag and start running. Stop only when I tell you. You stop before that, you go home and don’t come back, and every bleedin’ pound your father paid me will stay here.”

Dudley stared at the man in shock.

The red-haired giant growled and shoved Dudley with one meaty hand. “Go, boy! Before I change my mind about training you!”

Dudley ran.

The giant turned to Harry. “You must be the useless cousin I’ve got to baby-sit all summer. At least that florid swot Dursley knew what you’re worth. He warned me about you, you little punk. St Brutus’, eh?”

Harry stared up at him calmly, refusing to show the fear that had settled in his stomach. He met the man’s gaze evenly.

This man is no Lord Voldemort. I refuse to be cowed by anyone less.

He suddenly looked shrewder than Harry would have given him credit for. “Never heard of the place, myself, and I know every rathole institute for useless wankers in the whole bleedin’ country. But since Dursley paid good money for me to keep you here this summer, and a damn lot of it, I have to keep you here.”

Harry met Duncan’s eyes with a sudden sense of freedom. There was nothing this man could do to him that hadn’t already been done. He had nothing to be afraid of – except him confronting Vernon Dursley about the lie of St Brutus’.

What is Vernon going to do? Hit me? Harry almost laughed.

"You're a problem, kid." Duncan said flatly. "Either you're a punk thief and a worthless waste of carbon or," he gave Harry's clothes a distasteful look, "you're not."

He left unspoken the question Harry could almost read in his eyes: if Vernon Dursley could pay both for Dudley to be trained and Harry to be baby-sat, why was Harry dressed like a street kid?

"Either way, you can't be my problem. If I make you fatty's waterboy and you're a punk, that'll make you my problem. Punk or not, if I let you sit out here and do nothing, you'll distract the dumpling over there from his training, you'll be my problem. I can't let you wander about, because punk or not, I have no idea if you can keep yourself out of trouble, making you my problem." He hooked his thumbs into his belt. "So that leaves you just keeping out of the way. Best place for that is in the back with Gracie."

He pointed over his shoulder with a thumb to an unmarked door at the back of the large room.

Harry nodded, his sense of freedom evaporating.

"Punk or not, you're now her problem." He turned away from Harry without even waiting to see if the boy would head towards the door.

He probably – rightly! – thinks I'd be daft to argue him over it.

Keeping close to the walls, Harry walked towards the door, slightly surprised that he, Dudley, the red-haired giant, and this Gracie person were the only people there. It was eerie.

Uncle Vernon paid that man money to make sure I stayed here? Vernon Dursley spent as little money on Harry as possible, and begrudged every pence he did spend.

He was serious about not wanting me around Aunt Petunia. Even though he told himself it shouldn't, the thought still stung. He'd always taken care of his aunt when she was sick! How could he taint the new

baby? Surprisingly, he hadn't thought much about his unborn baby cousin, but he was suddenly struck with the fear it might be magical.

The main floor of the gym was an open atrium; smaller workout rooms and equipment were on the other levels. One entire wall was what looked to be a difficult climbing wall; the back wall was entirely mirrors, except where the door to 'Gracie' and an office were. The center of the room was a boxing ring; to one side were exercise machines and to the other, punching bags. The track Dudley was huffing and puffing on ran around the room and seemed inclined in places.

Harry paused, his hand hovering over the doorknob. He had no idea what he was going to find in there – and he got the impression this room was where he would be spending the vast majority of his summer.

He wasn't looking forward to the summer; sitting in a room in the back of the hot gym, nothing to do but think. Wallow.

Am I a Gryffindor or not?

He turned the doorknob and walked in.

The floor was black linoleum; three walls were mirrors. The fourth was white pads with red targets set at different height intervals and a series of bars set at different heights mounted on the wall. The lights were incandescent, not fluorescent, but seemed dimmer than the ones in the atrium. There were small wooden tables pushed against the walls and four straight-back wooden chairs near the door.

He almost didn't see her at first, even though she was standing in the middle of the room. She was tall and slender; waist-length steel-gray hair contrasted a face barely beginning to show the ravages of age.

Her eyes were closed and she was motionless. As far as he could tell, she didn't know he was there.

I assume this is Gracie.

He closed the door behind him just as she moved. Her bare feet slid across the black floor soundlessly as she flowed through what Harry thought was a dance. Each movement bled into the next with a breath; her motions were slow, as if she were caught in slow motion, but sinuous and controlled.

He hated interrupting or imposing on people, but he knew he would be in trouble if he went back into the main room; trouble that would get back to Uncle Vernon. He still hurt from the last time. So he stayed, and he watched.

Harry didn't know how long he watched her, but he was fascinated by how she moved. It was the expression on her face; the same rapture he wore when he flew.

He briefly wondered if Ginny felt the same way he did when she flew.

Why can't I keep her out of my mind? He remembered his dream. Her hand on his face and his chest. She had been so warm. And he hadn't wanted to send her away, or cause her to stop touching him.

But I can't let Voldemort have her again. I can't.

He kept watching. When she finished, she became motionless again – it seemed abrupt, almost unnatural, as if she was never meant to be motionless.

She turned to face him, appraising him with one hand on her hip; her eyes were almost the same steel-gray as her hair, only brighter.

Finally, her face broke out in a grin. "So, why did you get tucked away in the back with the crazy old lady?"

There was something about her that reminded Harry of Professor Dumbledore; slightly off-kilter, and a profound amusement with the entire world masking...something deeper, more powerful.

Harry shrugged. "My cousin is training here this summer. The redhead in charge told me to come back here and keep myself out of the way."

"Ahh," Gracie nodded, "and you're stuck here with your cousin because...?"

"Dudley Dursley. Uncle Vernon said I had to come with him. Even paid money to keep me here."

She sighed, and shrugged. "Looks like we're stuck with each other, then." She thrust out her hand. "Gracie McAllister."

He shook her hand.

"Harry Potter."

He almost expected a reaction, but she just nodded as if the two words were nothing more than a simple, common name.

"Right then, Harry. Here's what's what. My nephew Duncan out there has graciously allowed me to use this room for practice or whatever as long as I stay out of his way. Likewise, he stuck you back here to keep you out of his way, and I advise you to stay that way."

The unspoken question was: what was she supposed to do with him?

Harry shrugged, and looked down at his feet. "Don't mind me. I'm quiet and I don't eat much." He forced a smile. "I'll just bring a book or something tomorrow. I'm good at pretending I'm not here."

Gracie sighed, and nodded again. "Right, then. You do that, kid, and I'll be damned grateful. Normally, I wouldn't mind, but today's not such a good day for me. At least for a bit, I'll need complete silence so I can clear my mind. After that, I'll try to be better company."

Harry shook his head. "Don't worry about it. You'll barely know I'm here."

Gracie gave a final, curt nod and turned back to...well, whatever it was she'd been doing when he had first come in.

Harry looked at the wooden chairs, and opted for the floor instead. He sat cross-legged, leaning back against the wall, and closed his eyes – he'd stared at her enough and didn't want her to feel like she had an audience.

Clear her mind. The words – the very idea – was like a knife in his gut. And a reminder of his dream the night before. Why had he dreamed of Ginny?

Why he had felt warm when she touched him? Why he hadn't he wanted her to move her hand...or why it had been so hard to send her away.

It didn't matter. He couldn't dream of her anymore. Not like that. Voldemort could see into his mind, and it was far too dangerous for any of his friends to appear in his dreams. Or too often in his thoughts.

Harry reached into his pocket and clasped his wand in his hand; it was an empty comfort, but it was at least something.

I should have tried harder to master Occlumency. I have to find a way to clear my mind and keep Voldemort outside my thoughts.

He couldn't afford to let Voldemort trick him again. Who would he lose next time? Ginny? Ron? Hermione?

I have to master Occlumency.

And now was as good a time as any to start. Harry focused on clearing his mind, trying to think of nothing, but as usual, he couldn't. And the more he tried, the more his thoughts ran out of control, reminding him of all the things he had done or not done; all the times he had failed.

In those few moments when his thoughts did still, he felt himself starting to fall asleep, and had to wrench himself awake and start the process over again.

Then, just for a brief second, he cleared his mind and his scar exploded with pain.

Flicker.

He was walking across the front yard of a burning house. Ashes crunched under his feet and acrid smoke burned his eyes, nose and mouth. A man in a black robe stood in front of the flames, stretching out a pale, mottled hand, holding a slender wand of bent and twisted wood.

Voldemort. It was something in the way he stood, or something in the way he held his wand; some nameless sense that told him the magic that had been cast had come from Voldemort. Maybe it was their connection, or maybe it was the shared magic of their wands.

"Harry, so nice of you to join me." Voldemort turned and mockingly bowed to the teenage wizard. "Come to see my handiwork, have you?"

Harry stared in silent horror at what he saw; the stench of burnt flesh making his skin crawl and his stomach twist.

"No." He felt his anger rise, the all-consuming anger that had driven him to demolish Albus Dumbledore's office. "No!"

He didn't realize he had been running at Voldemort until he was stopped by a negligent wave of the Dark Lord's hand.

He turned, swinging his wand around to point at Harry. "You know something I don't know." His smirk was devoid of humor. "Legilimens!"

His scar burned and hurt like one of Uncle Vernon's prized drills was boring into his skull, through it and out the other side; he wanted to scream but his voice was choked by the taste of blood in his mouth, cloying warmth clogging his throat.

Flicker.

Gracie had just started to fall into a rhythm and when she heard the kid in the corner moan in apparent pain. She stopped in mid-motion and spun on her heel, silently praying that he hadn't hurt himself somehow – or even worse, had pulled some stupid-fool stunt to get her attention.

But he was sitting cross-legged, leaning against the wall, and seemed to be asleep. She would have called his outburst a nightmare, except the strange, lightning-shaped scar on his forehead was red and inflamed.

What in the bloody...?

She'd barely noticed the scar before; the lightning bolt shape was unusual, but Gracie had seen a lot of unusual scars. Hell, one of her longtime underground contacts - a bum with long silver hair and a long beard - had once claimed to have a map of the London Underground above his left knee.

He had dark circles etched under his eyes, bruises on his face and was almost painfully thin, to the point his clothes swallowed him whole.

Which doesn't make any sense, seeing how his family can afford to pay Duncan's rates and enough extra that Duncan braved making me a de facto babysitter.

Gracie sighed, trying to dismiss sudden feelings of guilt. He hadn't meant to, but the boy was already starting to get under her skin.

Not your problem, Gracie-girl. She scolded herself. But whatever kind of fit he's having is

She knelt down and took a closer look at the scar, touching it gingerly with her fingertips, surprised it was hot to the touch, almost like it were infected or the kid was running a fever.

A fever? In a flash, the most unlikely thought crossed her mind. Could the kid be having some kind of flashback? A few of the veterans on

the force had been susceptible to flashbacks, and one of the symptoms of a deep and prolonged one was a fever.

She walked over to her sports bag, pulled out a bottle of water, and splashed some on his face.

He came out of it with a strangled cry, one hand going to the scar on his head.

“You okay, kid?”

He didn’t answer her; he dove for the trashcan and unceremoniously vomited what little he’d eaten.

After a minute, he looked up and sank back against the wall, trembling. “I’ll be okay. I just need a minute.”

Gracie sat down next to him and handed him the water. “Flashbacks are hell, kid.”

Harry nodded gingerly, taking a sip of water.

“I’m gonna be a nosy old bitch and pry. You seeing anyone about those?”

Harry shook his head. “Not this summer. At school...there are people who can help.”

She looked into his green eyes and was surprised to see the same kind of haunted look she’d seen in her own eyes just before she’d decided to retire.

“I’m no shrink, kid, but I can teach you a bit of meditation. Just something to clear your head, help you focus.”

Something in his eyes flashed, and he suddenly had the look of a hungry man handed the ticket to a free banquet and turned away at the door.

“To clear my mind?”

“Yeah, kid. To clear your mind.” She motioned for him to drink. “You need some fluids or you’ll end up bent over that can again.”

She heard him mutter something as he took a drink, but she couldn’t quite make it out.

“What was that?”

Harry shook his head and shrank back. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to say it out loud...I’ll just go over here and be quiet now. I didn’t mean to be a bother...”

She shook her head with a grunt of frustration. This was not going well at all. “Harry, I’d like to think I didn’t scare you witless the first day you’re stuck with me. And flashbacks aren’t your fault. Now what was it you said?”

Harry shook his head and rubbed his scar. “It’ll just sound stupid to you.”

Gracie grinned in a way that reminded Harry of Fred and George. “So?”

He spoke slowly and clearly. “I said ‘it’s worth more to me than my life to learn to clear my mind’.”

Gracie leaned back, startled at the desperation in his voice. “Okay. You’re right. That didn’t make any sense. But I’m not sure it has to.”

Melodramatic, but telling. Whatever gave him the flashbacks...I don’t think it’s over yet. She looked at him a little harder this time, thinking fast.

He wants to learn to clear his mind so badly, then?

The solution was simple, and if he went for it, maybe her conscience would calm down a bit.

“Right then, kid. I’ll make you a deal. I’m trying to spend this summer training, getting my head on straight. But I have a debt to pay, a debt that’s not money. You help me pay that debt and I’ll teach you to clear your mind and maybe a bit more.”

Harry looked at her, uncertain. He didn’t know her; he didn’t know anything about her, or what she was offering to teach him.

But if she can teach me to clear my mind...wouldn’t that be worth the risk? To protect my friends from me?

“What do you mean, ‘and more’?” His voice was hesitant, but there was a note of curiosity there.

She grinned. “I’ll teach you what my teacher taught me, kid; martial arts. I’ll teach you to not only clear your mind, but how to integrate physical and mental discipline in ways that, if you stay in practice after we part ways, will help you control those flashbacks. At least, give you a damn good place to start from.”

She stood and reached down for her water bottle. Harry handed it up to her, and their hands brushed, just briefly, and he heard phoenix song; just a brief whisper of melody that made the pain in his scar ease as if Fawkes were sitting on his shoulder singing.

He could feel his wand vibrate in sync with the music.

“Can I think for a minute? My head is still a little fuzzy.”

Gracie shrugged. “Sure, kid. Take all the time you need. Offer is open until I say it’s not.”

Harry leaned back against the wall again. What was that? Why did I hear Fawkes singing like that?

He reached his hand back into his pocket and clasped his wand, still warm from the burst of phoenix song; his hand tingled from the magic.

Can she teach me what Snape couldn't? She's a muggle...maybe muggle techniques don't work for wizards...but Snape said Occlumency wasn't really magic.

She stripped off her wraparound jacket – the kind he saw all martial artists wearing, revealing a black tank top; between her shoulder blades he caught a glimpse of a colored tattoo; faded reds and golds blended with black lines; a phoenix.

A phoenix. That was too much, even for him. Coincidence and phoenix song weren't things that went together, not in a muggle gym.

Who is she?

He pushed himself to his feet.

Can I afford not to try?

"All right." Harry thrust his hand towards her. He wasn't sure he could, or should, trust her. He wasn't sure he was making the right decision. But he had to try something. "You teach me, I'll help you. Deal."

She took his hand, feeling the strange material of the glove covering it; it was the smoothest, supplest leather she'd ever felt. "You agreed without knowing what the debt is." She meant to be admonishing, but the words came out as a quiet statement; more a curiosity than anything else.

Harry nodded. "If this works, it's worth a lot to me. So, when do we start?"

No need to tell her that when summer ended he would disappear.

"Now." Gracie answered firmly. "Take off your shoes, socks, and shirt."

"My shirt?" His eyebrows drew together in a quizzical expression that stole the haunted look from his eyes, replacing it with such startling innocence that Gracie nearly burst out laughing.

“Yeah, your shirt, kid. You’re about to get hot and sweaty and that oversize hand-me-down won’t fare well. That, and you need every bit of freedom of motion you can get.”

In remarkable silence, the boy disrobed, revealing a pale torso and chest. Dark bruises and welts marred his back and sides. Obviously fresh, the bruises looked layered over other, older injuries.

I hate being right, Gracie thought.

A familiar sick feeling welled up in her stomach, and she swallowed it. It was no longer her place to be involved. She was just teaching him. Nothing more.

At her gesture, he walked to the middle of the room, his hands resting easily at his sides.

Gracie paced around him, examining everything about him – his stance, his breathing, with a critical eye. She frowned.

“What’s that in your pants?”

Harry mumbled, “Nothing.”

“Kid, lying is hardly admirable. And you’re not very good at it.”

The look on his face made her think he’d just been struck. Had he never been called on a lie before? Every kid lied – it was an adult’s responsibility to spot the lie and call it. Good training for the white lies that greased the squeaky wheels of life.

He reached into his pocket and drew out his wand. She stared at it, but said nothing – she had no more idea what a wand was than Harry did a kukri.

Strange thing to carry around. Still, there was something familiar about it, as if she’d seen something like it before, but couldn’t remember.

He set it on the chairs, and went back to stand in the middle of the room.

“The glove too, kid.”

He paused, his muscles shifting ever so slightly as something in him galvanized from submissive to defiant. “No.”

Gracie sighed. This was why she hated teaching. “Yes. Or you sit there and read all summer.”

He thought about it; she could see the turmoil in his eyes. “Then I’ll sit and read.”

Gracie rocked back on her heels again. “If learning to clear your thoughts is so important, why give it up over a glove?” She let a breath pass, then added. “Be honest with me. If you’re bluntly honest with me, then I’ll be bluntly honest with you.”

Harry looked at her, trying to figure out what he was supposed to say. Trust. She wants trust. I want to give it to her. But why do I want to trust her so easily?

Harry closed his eyes, and through an effort will, spoke. “Because you would see something that would make you ask questions I don’t want to answer.”

She paused, and ran her fingertips over a set of fresh bruises on his back. He flinched at her touch – not at the pain her touch caused, but from her casual brush skin on skin.

His flinch begged questions Gracie could easily guess the answers to. Gracie walked back around to face him.

“Something tells me I should ask.” Her voice was a gentle whisper as she dropped her hand. “But I won’t. You can keep the glove. I’ll give you that much if you’ll give me something.”

She paused, waiting for him to answer her. He nodded once.

“I need your solemn promise you will accept I know what I am teaching you; ask questions, but don’t argue. Everything will be explained, but not always at first. Do that, and practice. Practice every spare moment you have; every morning and every night. It’s the only way you’ll ever reach whatever goal that’s driving you.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I can do that, but I reserve the right to refuse to do something I don’t feel comfortable with.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, kid.” She smiled at him in what she hoped was a reassuring way. “Let’s get started then, shall we?”

“What should I do?”

Gracie pointed at a spot on the other side of the gym. “Walk across the room for me. Just walk.”

That seemingly absurdly simple request started the ten most grueling hours of Harry Potter’s life.

‘Take a breath, kid.’ He had sucked in air, and she had shaken her head – then the flat of her hand slapped his stomach, sending the air rushing out of him. ‘Breathe right. From your diaphragm. Not from your shoulders!’

It took nearly ten minutes before he started breathing right. And even then, she had to keep reminding him.

‘Take a single step forward and stop.’ She eyed the way he stood, adjusting his shoulders, his feet, his legs – everything she could, until he stood right.

Five hours of breathing, of standing in the stances she showed him, of raising and lowering his arms slowly with each breath. Counting one-one thousand two-one thousand three-one thousand...to ten-one thousand with each breath, with each adjustment of his body. Of transitioning from one stance to another.

Harry’s muscles ached and his body was as sore as he had ever been after Quidditch. And true to her word, he was drenched in sweat.

His back felt like it was on fire and the bruises from his Uncle ached abominably.

The movements were easy to grasp, and easy to remember. He'd been memorizing wand movements and stances for five years. Breathing was harder, and Gracie had no sympathy for him.

"Nothing I teach you will matter if you can't learn how to breathe properly, kid. Breathing is the key to clearing your mind, to centering yourself. It is the center of your focus is the first step to mastering anything else."

Once she was satisfied he knew how important remembering to breathe correctly was, she taught him to stretch. Or, as Harry thought, to contort.

Laughing softly, she smiled in sympathy at his soundless grimaces – thus far, aside from the occasional grunt if he lost his balance, he had not spoken a single word unless she asked him a question. And it was obvious he was in pain.

"Don't worry, kid. It'll get easier, I promise. Just practice tonight before you go to bed, and tomorrow before you eat breakfast."

Three hours of stretching, of bending his body into new and unusual ways – and he still had no idea how he was supposed to clear his mind.

I have to trust her. He told himself. Besides, what have I got to lose?

But then she taught him how to move. Tai'chi, as she called the series of motions and breaths, was the first martial art she'd ever learned, and so it was the first she would teach him.

As the gym was shutting down for the day, Dudley stumbled into the back room to collect Harry and blinked dumbly at the sight of Harry, drenched in sweat, moving with excruciating slowness through the first ten steps of a tai'chi form...and then Dudley grinned, throwing Harry a towel.

“Clean up, Potter. Dad’ll be here any minute, and I’d hate for him to think you’d been working hard. It’d ruin his day.”

It was Harry’s turn to blink dumbly, and after a moment, he grinned back.

End Chapter

CHAPTER SIX

Truce

Dinner was awkward and uncomfortable. Harry and Dudley were too tired to make much conversation. Vernon glared at Harry while Petunia looked queasily at her plate. But Veronica was more than willing to fill the silence with inane chatter, most of it lecturing Dudley on his responsibilities as both a Dursley male and a future professional athlete.

“I’m glad you’re training so hard, Dudley. When you’ve made a career of this, it’s not just your fans that will be judging you, but the bookmakers and the promoters and the agents – some of whom mingle in the highest circles, Dudley, the highest. You have to be seen as a strong and honorable man. Say little, but do what you say, no matter what.”

She then pointed her fork at Harry. “And you, boy, it’s good to see you learning your place. Your cousin is going to need your support. He’ll need you to take care of him and make sure everyone else working for him does the same. He’s your blood, boy, your blood. No one will take care of him like you will, nobody. That’s your duty, as his cousin and his personal trainer, just as much as Dudley’s is to represent himself well.”

Harry was grimly amused at the idea he was to be Dudley’s close confidant and personal trainer. But he quickly realized that it did give him an excuse to practice what Gracie was teaching him – after all, how could he help Dudley if he couldn’t keep up with him?

Just like the previous two summers, the whole family was rigidly following Dudley’s diet, now modified by Duncan McAllister. Veronica was cooking instead of Aunt Petunia, and although she made sure Harry got less than half what Dudley got, it was more food than he was used to getting from his ‘family’.

Harry cleaned the kitchen after Petunia had gone to lie down and Vernon and Veronica had gone to the sitting room for a spot of brandy and the evening news. But Dudley waited for Harry to finish.

“Outside, Potter. Think today is over yet?”

Feeling as if a stone had settled in his stomach, Harry followed his cousin outside.

Dudley is learning to fight better...he'll need a punching bag. I hope there's enough left of me to practice for Gracie tonight.

Setting his jaw, Harry knew he had to, no matter what. He hadn't lied to her when he'd told her it was worth more than his life to learn to clear his mind.

To master Occlumency.

Like he should have the past year. If he had, Sirius would be alive. His friends wouldn't have been hurt. Maybe he wouldn't be spending his summer isolated from the magical world.

And if you had, would Dumbledore have told you the prophecy?

The thought chilled him as he followed Dudley out into the darkening evening. In the distance, he heard the soft hoot of an owl, and felt his throat constrict with a sharp pang of guilt and loneliness. He stared up at the clear sky, watching, straining to see a glimpse of snow-white wings, almost eager for the painful nip Hedwig would administer for sending her away when she came back with letters from his friends.

But there was nothing.

Good!He told himself harshly. They're in more danger with you than without you. They'll be safe, and you'll be as safe as you ever are. And soon, they'll be safer...it's time I started correcting my mistakes.

The cool, sticky-slick practice pads slapped his face.

“Think fast, Potter. Stop stargazing and come help me practice.”

Dudley sneered at him, but Harry met Dudley's eyes calmly and the sneer faded, replaced by the same lost desperation he had seen that morning.

Leaning down, Harry picked up the pair of red pads, slipping them over his hands. Mutely, he listened to Dudley instruct him on how to hold them, how to respond to him.

Still as a statue, he held the pads out for Dudley to strike. For almost twenty minutes, Dudley pounded away at Harry's hands, the two-inch thick foam pads proving little protection against his cousin's sheer physical power. Dudley ducked and wove, dancing in and out on the balls of his toes, showing surprising grace and control for his size. Harry took the punishment without flinching, but as always, Dudley wanted more.

"Damn you, Potter, don't just stand there like you're struck dumb! Make me work for it, or by God I'll hit you so fucking hard you won't wake up 'til you've missed the train back to freaksville! Got it?"

Harry stepped back, glaring at his cousin. "You want me to make you work for it, Dudders?"

"Make me work for it, Potter!" Dudley growled savagely. "I'm only aiming for your hands...make it hard for me. Duck and weave, come in and out at me! I know you're a ruddy fast little bugger when you want to be, so bloody well do it!" He seemed as frustrated by his own inability to find the words to convince his cousin to really help him train as he was with Harry for not knowing how to help. "This is your bloody chance to really get me, Potter! You don't want to waste that, do you?"

Harry smiled a cold smile. "Why don't you get me a pair of gloves and a mouthpiece, then?"

I'll be damned if I'm going to let you beat me into a pulp without a chance to give as good as get. Harry had spent the first eleven years of his life fighting Dudley, and the past five years fighting for his life.

To Harry's surprise, Dudley grinned fiercely. "Think you can handle me, Potter? Think you can keep me from knocking those glasses off your smirking face?"

The challenge in Dudley's eyes was unmistakable. Think you can face me on my terms?

Harry reached into his trousers and pulled out his wand. Slowly, deliberately, he set it on the patio table.

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More than two hours later, both Harry and Dudley were short of breath and soaked in sweat. Both had thrown their shirts aside long ago, and were eyeing the other with new respect.

Blindingly fast, Harry's Seeker's reflexes had saved him so far; but Dudley hadn't pulled any punches. The few he had landed were devastating proof of just how good a boxer Dudley already was. Harry's ribs ached with each breath, and his jaw was swollen.

And my kidneys may never forgive me.

Hitting back was useless; the few blows Harry had landed had done nothing but make Dudley laugh. Instead, the smaller boy had focused on blocking and dodging his cousin.

But they were both smiling. Every few breaths, one of them would taunt the other; after awhile, it became almost playful. Neither boy said anything, but they were both starting to have fun.

It ended when Uncle Vernon stepped outside, and saw the wand lying on his patio table.

"Boy! Get inside, now! Just what were you thinking leaving...that...thing...out where just anyone could see it?" Harry stood there for a moment, gasping, eyeing Dudley sidelong, not sure his cousin wouldn't belt him from behind. But Dudley was only standing there, waiting.

“Move, boy!” Vernon’s face was turning puce, and his arm was twitching.

Harry dashed to the table, frantically trying to strip off the boxing gloves.

Vernon’s casual backhand caught him with a glove in his mouth, and his almost free hand reaching for his wand.

Harry hit the ground, his head swimming. He vaguely noticed his glasses were off his face, and that the side of his head hurt.

Vernon leaned down, his small eyes boring into Harry. “When I tell you to move, boy, you move.”

Harry spat out his mouthpiece. “Yes, Uncle Vernon.”

The large man kicked him in the ribs Dudley had bruised. “Good. Now move, boy.”

Scrambling, Harry picked up his wand and staggered into the house.

“Cupboard, boy. Now.”

Dudley followed them in, trudging up the stairs to shower, his face an unreadable mask.

- 0 -

Harry sat down on the cot, enduring his cramping muscles, the itching and odor of drying sweat. He would wait; even Uncle Vernon eventually went to bed.

Until then, he would practice. He had promised; and no matter what else he failed at, he would do his best to keep his word.

He sat cross-legged on the cot, forcing his body into the position Gracie taught him. He closed his eyes, welcoming the darkness.

Harry breathed, focusing on breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth, using his diaphragm not his shoulders...he made his breathing slow...forcing out any thoughts except the breathing.

either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives...

Trelawney's harsh voice came back to him, a whispered ghost from Dumbledore's Pensieve.

..."Come on, you can do better than that!" Sirius yelled, his voice echoing around the cavernous room.

The second jet of light hit him squarely on the chest.

The laughter had not quite died from his face, but his eyes widened in shock.

It seemed to take Sirius an age to fall. His body curved in a graceful arc as he sank backward through the ragged veil hanging from the arch...

Harry breathed in.

...he struggled hard and viciously, desperate to escape Lupin's iron grasp.

"There's nothing you can do, Harry...nothing...He's gone."

Harry breathed out.

Harry breathed in.

Breathed out.

The images began to fade and there was nothing but the echoing, aching emptiness inside him.

He didn't know how long he sat there, but when he opened his eyes, he heard Uncle Vernon's rumbling snores. Every muscle ached, and many had tightened to the point he could barely move.

Gradually, he was able to stand and hesitantly open the door, peering into the dark house.

As silently as he could, Harry pulled a tattered rag of a shirt from his trunk and crept from the cupboard to the downstairs bathroom.

He had no glasses; only the dim light from the streetlights outside created shadows and silhouettes for him to navigate by.

He didn't dare turn on the light in the bathroom. Taking exaggerated time with each movement, Harry plugged the sink, and turned on the water, just a bare trickle. While the sink filled, he stripped off his filthy clothes, throwing them aside.

Wincing, Harry forced his body through Gracie's exercises, starting with the stretches and then moving into tai'chi. The slow movements and breathing helping ease the tight knot of emotion in his chest and the stretching relieved some of the cramps, and by the time he was finished, the sink was nearly full.

Harry gave himself a quick sponge bath, relishing feel of cool water washing away grime. He even pulled off his glove and scrubbed his hand, amazed at how clear the words were against his skin.

I must not tell lies.

Gracie had come too close to that subject, twice in just a few minutes. Umbridge had succeeded; she had made Harry afraid to tell a lie.

Dumbledore lies all the time by telling the truth. Just one more thing I need to learn.

He rinsed out the glove, amazed at how fast the dragonhide shed the water.

He finally stuck his head in the sink to rinse out his hair and let the water run down around him, soaking into the rug. By morning, it would be dry.

He let himself air-dry for a few minutes before gathering his clothes and returning to collapse onto his pallet.

End Chapter

LETTERS II

Hedwig flew down in a lazy arc towards 4 Privet Drive, gracefully shedding momentum as she drifted around the house, searching for an open window she wasn't sure would be there.

An odd trilling sound whistled through the air, and Hedwig curled her wings to follow it. Gently setting down on the roof, she gave a reproachful look to the diminutive figure sitting next to her.

The figure took the letter from Hedwig and awkwardly patted the owl's side. Hooting mournfully, Hedwig settled in to wait.

- 0 -

Harry found a letter on his pillow. There was a note on it, in unfamiliar and rather messy handwriting.

Owls cannot enter house, so put letters to send on pillow. Letters sent to you will appear same place.

There might have been a time when Harry wouldn't have trusted that kind of a note, but after Dumbledore had explained the nature and level of the protections around 4 Privet Drive, he was inclined to think the note was from a member of the Order who was watching him. The grammar was odd, but he wasn't great shakes as a writer either, and he was used to Hermione's perfect writing.

Which means Dumbledore knows what's happening to me. And had done nothing. He hadn't even responded to Harry's letter. He smiled bitterly as he picked up Ginny's letter.

Harry,

Well, you certainly know how to stump a girl. Now I'm not sure what to say to you except 'thank you for the apology' and not to be so hard on yourself.

We never really have gotten to know each other, have we? I mean, I am your best mate's kid sister, but I'm also a person in my own right.

Sometimes it's really hard being Ron's kid sister, but then I think – it's better to someone's kid sister than the girl who went crazy reading a diary and nearly killed people.

Growing up, I was always taught that if people judged you by your actions and not your words, then they were judging you rightly. But I don't want to be judged for my actions because my actions don't really mean anything, because they weren't my own! And those actions mean that no one pays attention to what I say, only what I've done.

I think that'll probably make sense to you, because people judge you by something you did as a baby. Even me. But it's hard not to; to have grown up learning about the Boy Who Lived and his defeat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named when adult wizards of incredible power had fallen to him one by one...

I can't imagine the terror and the confusion people lived in. Not sure who was or who wasn't a Death Eater...Tom and his minions attacking Muggles and Muggle-borns and those few wizards willing to stand with them...it must have been horrible.

And you know what? I'm scared it will start again, because people didn't listen to what you had to say. Even though your actions and your words matched, no one wanted to listen. I don't know if it was willful denial or a last vestige of hope that Tom was gone for good or what. Now I know Tom has the upper hand and we're playing his game with his rules.

Merlin! Now I'm getting morbid and you're probably sitting there blaming yourself for something that's not your fault. So – stop it!

You may be stuck there at the Dursley's but try to enjoy what you can of the summer. We'll get you out of there before too long.

If I didn't make you all upset with anything I said, write me back!

Ginny W

P.S. Your Gringotts key? Hmm...time to go shopping! Yes, Harry, I'll be glad to take care of Hedwig for you!

And just so you know, I don't believe you. I don't think things are fine, otherwise you wouldn't have sent Hedwig. So you'd better take care of yourself, Harry Potter!

Her return letter wasn't what he expected from her. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but it wasn't that. She'd responded to everything he'd said in his letter and hadn't made him feel bad about forgetting what she'd gone through or even for excluding her for the past four years.

Not only that, she made him think.

What a person did and why they did it instead of who that person appeared to be. He had to wonder – how did his actions seem to others? Did he really seem mad and imbalanced or evil? Lots of people saw him talking to a snake or collapsing or even defying Umbridge. Not many people saw him fighting Death Eaters or dueling Voldemort or any of the other things he'd done.

They'd seen him in a rage, they'd seen him on the Quidditch pitch, they'd seen him fighting with Malfoy and they'd seen him in the Triwizard Tournament. What did people really think of him when they didn't see or know him? They only knew what other people told them.

His legend and his fame and his infamy. Somehow, he wasn't surprised Ginny could make him think like this when not even Hermione could. She'd been there; she'd faced Voldemort, she'd had him in her mind. She'd even tried to kill people under his influence.

He re-read the letter several times before he noticed the handwriting. It was very, very familiar...and so was the purple ink the letter was written in.

He dug around in his trunk for a moment, and pulled out the note he had found on his bed right before leaving Hogwarts, the one he'd found with the glove.

Sure enough, the handwriting and the ink matched. His fist clenched, and the leather glove tightened against his skin.

Ginny had given him the glove.

He wasn't sure what he felt about that. Or what he should feel.

End Chapter

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fundamentals

They walked into the gym before the sun had peaked over the horizon.

Harry was carrying Dudley's gym bag. His back ached and stung and his stomach growled quietly. New bruises throbbed, and muscles he had thought in relatively good shape protested the harsh treatment of the previous day. His head was starting to ache from the strain of seeing without his glasses, and he knew it was only going to get worse.

Duncan was waiting for Dudley. He was an imposing figure, nearly seven feet tall and seemingly sculpted from solid muscle and sinew; he had his arms crossed over his chest, his blue eyes blazing, his face an expressionless glower. The redhead extended an arm the size of a tree trunk, muscle corded like high-tension wire rippling as one thick finger indicated a far corner of the gym.

"Put fatty's bag in the corner and go in the back with Gracie."

He didn't say a word to Dudley; instead, he favored Harry's cousin with an impatient grunt.

Harry turned away as fast as he could, barely remembering in time Dudley had ordered him not to watch – but not before he caught a glimpse of the struggle between determination and spoiled laziness battle it out on his cousin's doughy face as he started to run his laps around the indoor track.

Dropping Dudley's bag in the corner, Harry slipped inside the back room as quickly as he could – he had no intention of drawing ire from Dudley or Duncan. He closed the door and found himself in total darkness.

From the light into the dark. Harry thought sardonically. The story of my life.

Fire flared into existence as if by the magic Harry knew so well; the brief flash of light almost blinded him. His eyes cleared to see Gracie light the candle sitting in front of her with a flick of her wrist, flame trailing over the wick just long enough for it to catch before the motion extinguished the match.

Contrasting the hissing violence of the match, the candle was a caress of light, pushing the dark away, leaving a globe of flickering bright orange and dappled shadow. Harry hesitantly moved toward her, but she stopped him with a raised hand.

What is going on here? His stomach tightened, and he started to wonder if it had been wise to accept her offer. I knew it was too good to be true.

And just because she had used a match to light the candle didn't mean she wasn't a witch – and it didn't mean she wasn't working for Voldemort. Or Dumbledore. Or Fudge.

“Uh-huh, kid.” She spoke softly, but with authority. “Shoes, socks and shirt off first. Bow to me, then sit.”

Her tone wasn't admonishing, but there was a hint of a rebuke. Harry complied, shivering a bit as the mechanically chilled air raked over his skin and scabs.

He sat cross legged on the floor across from her. She gave him a brief nod.

“From now on, when you come in, you take off your shirt, shoes and socks. Bow at the door and then bow to me.”

Harry nodded. That makes no sense, but I've had teachers ask me to do stranger things than that.

“I tested you yesterday.”

Harry's face darkened, but he didn't say anything. He let her continue.

“You passed.” Her voice was flintier, harsher than he was used to it being. “But you’re desperate to learn, and that can be dangerous.”

Her silence told Harry it was his turn to talk, but instead of an answer, he only found another question. “What do you want me to say?”

Gracie barked a harsh laugh. “That’s a better answer than I gave my own teacher when he put me in the same spot I just put you.” She sighed, and fixed her eyes on his. “Harry, I want you to do the impossible.”

He couldn’t resist flashing a quick half-smile. “I’m good at that.”

“I hope so.” Gracie answered. “Because I want you to reconcile two mutually exclusive things. I want you to question everything I teach you, ask every question that comes to mind, and I want you to do whatever I tell you to do without hesitation. Can you do that?”

Harry paused. I think I’m in over my head. This is all too weird. Weird or not...who else could he turn to if he was going to learn to clear his mind? Snape wouldn’t teach him, and Harry didn’t want to wait until he went back to Hogwarts to train with Dumbledore. And what else was he going to do all summer?

“I don’t know. But I want to try.”

Gracie huffed. “Again, with a better answer than I gave. All right, then, kid. You said you wanted to learn to clear your mind, and this morning, you’re going to start learning how.”

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Harry bit back a groan as he picked himself up off the floor. Again.

For the last two hours, he had spent more time laying on the thin blue mats Gracie had laid out on the floor than he had spent standing. And every time he got up, Gracie would throw him back to the mats, then tell him what he done wrong.

“Knowing how to fall is the fundamental skill of learning martial arts, kid. If you don’t know how to fall, you’re never gonna master any other skill I teach you.”

Of course, Gracie had told him the same thing about how to stand. And how to breath. And how to walk.

It seems that everything is ‘the’ fundamental skill.

But he had no idea how having the older woman throw him to the ground was teaching him anything except how to fall down. He was certain he had already mastered that particular skill, at least from how easily she managed to throw him each and every time.

So he stood back up and braced himself like she had shown him, and once again, she threw him down. And once again, he tried to breathe out and slap the ground as he fell.

Once she was satisfied he was getting the hang of falling, she had him get a drink of water and take a few minutes to catch his breath.

Then they started again, this time shifting back to learning the slow, graceful movements of tai’chi. Though it did give his back a break, tai’chi was just as hard in its own way as break-falls were. It required concentration and control of a degree that Harry was very unused to.

Training with Gracie was like nothing he’d ever done before; Hogwarts, regardless of what it taught, was still a school and operated inside the paradigm of school. Gracie’s teaching was staggeringly different.

She would show him something once, maybe twice, then it was up to him to master it. He would keep trying, while she watched and corrected him. He would try again and again until he got it right several times in a row, then she would move on to something else.

She asked him questions that seemed to be random or even absurd. “So tell me, kid – what is breath?”

He had answered her with what he thought were the facts. “Breath is breathing; air going in and out of the body to bring oxygen to the blood.”

She had shaken her head. “Breath is life, kid. Energy. You can’t survive without breath for long at all. Food, water, shelter – these things you can survive without for long periods. Not so with breath. It’s energy in, and it’s energy out. How you breathe determines what is done with your energy, how ‘good’ it works or how ‘bad’ it works. Breathe wrong, the energy is wrong. Breathe right, and the energy will flow through you. Chi – life force, life energy, whatever you want to call it – it’s the fundamental energy that lets you live and move and act. Respect it, be in harmony with it, and you’ll have all of it you’ll ever need. Breathing right is the first step to tapping into that energy.”

Harry had then concentrated on his breathing, and not the movements of the form. Gracie had stopped him, and made him start over.

“Mind. Body. Spirit. Chi runs through ‘em all, kid. Breathing focuses, movement directs. Make the two the same; breathe in, and pull back towards you. Inside motion. Breathe out, move away from you. Outside motion. Each motion made with a breath taken or released. Slow and easy does it. Speed and power are your enemies in training.”

It had taken him half the day, but when he had finally realized if he concentrated on the motions, his breathing fell into sync without conscious thought.

But no matter how hard the training was, Harry was surprised to realize he was actually enjoying himself. Gracie set him clear goals and was equally generous with praise and criticism as he struggled to master the techniques and movements she was teaching him. He was earning his aches and pains through honest work instead of Uncle Vernon’s ‘discipline’ or battles against Voldemort and Death Eaters, and the physical exertion gave him the same satisfaction Quidditch practice always had.

Best of all was that Gracie had kept her word; much of what she was teaching him would help him discipline his mind as well as his body, and with every technique he mastered, he was that much closer to mastering Occlumency and keeping Voldemort from seeing what was in his mind.

As he practiced, he tried to ignore the little voice in the back of his mind that crowed with triumph.

He had found a way to learn Occlumency without letting Snape torture him every night. He had found a way to learn to protect himself, at least physically, from the likes of Death Eaters and bullies like Draco Malfoy and his hench-thugs, Crabbe and Goyle. He had found a way to protect his mind from Voldemort.

And maybe, just maybe if he could learn enough and become strong enough, he could convince Dumbledore to let him be a part of the real fight against the Dark Lord.

Each time the thought threatened to sneak to the forefront of his thoughts, Harry ruthlessly suppressed it, the way he had suppressed fantasies of having a real family who loved and wanted him while he was growing up.

Dumbledore doesn't trust me because of what Voldemort can see in my mind. Snape doesn't trust me because I'm my father's son. Ron and Hermione and even Ginny shouldn't trust me because being my friend means becoming a target.

He could live with that. He didn't trust Dumbledore, not after what the old man had kept from him. He had never trusted Severus Snape, and he doubted that would change anytime soon. And he had lived without friends for the first eleven years of his life; he could do it again.

But then why couldn't he stop hoping Ginny – or Ron or Hermione – would send him a letter? Or that Snape would realize James Potter was a dead man Harry had never met? That Albus Dumbledore would help him discover 'the power the Dark Lord know not.'

Nymphadora Tonks should have been bored.

After all, she was sitting outside McAllister's Gym on a bus stop bench, staring in the front windows, watching Dudley Dursley being worked like a Malfoy house-elf under the strict and demanding eyes of Duncan McAllister.

But she was too worried about the person she was supposed to be watching to be bored. Although she was beginning to understand why all the cops on her father's TV shows always smoked, drank coffee, and ate doughnuts on stakeouts. It gave someone something to think about, to keep their hands busy, and to keep them awake.

Unfortunately, there was only so much you could hide with an invisibility cloak. The aroma of coffee or the telltale wisps of smoke apparently wafting from nowhere would be dead giveaways. And not only did Tonks not want Harry to spot her, she didn't want anyone else to spot her. She was mortally certain, given his orders regarding the boy, that Cornelius Fudge had his own people watching Harry.

I bet they can't get into 4 Privet Drive or the back room of that gym any better than we can.

Or so she fervently hoped. Thus far, all the Order's watchers had been able to determine was that Harry would be spending most of his summer in that back room, with a woman named Gracie McAllister. Dumbledore seemed unconcerned – even somewhat optimistic – about the situation. But, as usual, he was the only one. Everyone else was worried.

We don't know what's happening to him inside either place! The most we can do is follow him around all sneaky-like and hope he's not starving to death or being transported from one locked room to another, like some kind of prisoner.

The problem with following him around all sneaky-like was that magic made it remarkably easy and effective, if sometimes boring for the person being sneaky. Meaning she could be sitting next to one of Fudge and Umbridge's agents who was thinking the same thoughts

she was and not even know it. Or – for all the Order knew – such an agent was even now in the back room with Harry and Gracie, keeping a far closer eye on the Boy Who Lived than his friends and protectors could.

What made it worse for Tonks was that she was staying at the Burrow, and whenever she returned there – no matter what time of day or night, Molly Weasley was waiting for her. And Molly's mother's eyes asked questions the Weasley matriarch didn't give voice to.

What am I supposed to tell her? That Dumbledore says I'm supposed to sit on my ass out here because if I get too close to Harry, he might spot me?

Her only comfort was if Dumbledore were right about Harry being able to spot the Order, then any of Fudge's agents who got too close would be caught by Harry. Except they wouldn't be as amused about being discovered as a member of the Order would be.

So Tonks just had to sit, and wait, and worry.

- 0 -

Harry leaned back against the wall, and let out a slow breath. He couldn't remember when he had last been this tired. Or hurt like this.

It's like some kind of slow-motion Cruciatus...

When Gracie had finally finished with him, he had sunk down to the floor and leaned against the wall. She had just chuckled.

"Seriously, kid, you've done better than I thought you would. Don't be so hard on yourself."

Harry closed his eyes, and let the slight breeze from the air conditioner dry the sweat running down his face and chest.

Something hard slapped against his stomach. He looked down, and saw a large, five subject spiral notebook, with 'college-ruled' paper. A pack of green pens was taped to the back of it.

He looked up, and saw Gracie grinning at him. “What, you thought you wouldn’t have homework?”

He groaned. “A guy can hope, can’t he?”

Gracie’s chuckled. “Hope away, kid. That there is your Journey Book. I expect you to write in it when I tell you to – I’ll give you specific things to think about and to write about. And I expect you to write in it when I don’t tell you to. I want you to keep track of what you learn – connections you make, things you understand or observe. Questions you have. Start tonight; write about breath. Tell me why breath is energy.”

Harry just nodded, and leaned back against the comfortable wall.

Which is exactly where Dudley found him ten minutes later when it was time to go.

End Chapter

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hermione

The silence in the Granger family car was a very stilted thing. Normally, Hermione's parents would be talking and bantering, asking her about school, but they were silent.

There wasn't anything left to say.

They knew how she felt about this. She knew how they felt about it.

They were almost to the hotel before anyone spoke. Hermione's mother, Jane, found her voice first. "We'll have to keep your Hogwarts things in our room, but when we get there you can take a few minutes to get anything you need out of it before we put it in the closet. We've got another trunk made up for you with books and things to make it look like you really go to Straghow."

Hermione forced herself to nod, not trusting herself to speak. She wasn't sure what she would say. Five years ago – even three years ago – she wouldn't have even dreamed of arguing with her mother. She'd been through a lot since then and she wasn't the same person anymore. Now, all she could do was force herself to smile and give the barest of nods.

"You'll be rooming with Rachel and Delilah, sweetie. They're a bit older than you, but I'm sure it'll be fine."

Hermione still didn't say anything. Her mother kept talking.

"I'm glad you're not putting up a fuss about all of this. Your father was very worried you wouldn't agree with us keeping your wand in your trunk."

Hermione looked up. "No. I'm keeping my wand."

"Hermione..." her mother's tone was warning.

“No, mother. I’m keeping my wand.” How could she explain to her mother that she was worried about what might happen if she didn’t have it with her? How could she explain to her mother she was a target in a war?

How can I not tell them? They’re targets, too...

“Well, it’s not like you’re allowed to do much outside of school, are you? So what would you need it for?”

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to just listen to Crookshanks purr for a second before replying. “Part of the deal was I would be allowed to keep my wand. If you won’t keep your side or things, then I’m leaving as soon as we get to the hotel.”

Jane glared over the seat at her daughter. “And just how would you do that, young lady?”

Hermione looked up at met her mother’s eyes. “I would take the bus to the Leaky Cauldron. From there, I would take the Floo to the Burrow. Or I would just summon the Knight Bus and go to the Burrow.”

“Oh, fine! If you really need a safety blanket, you can keep your wand.”

Hermione smiled thinly. She knew what her mother was trying to do, and she wasn’t going to let it work. “Thank you, mother.”

“There now, easily settled,” Dan Granger, her father, interjected. “Jane, dear, we should keep our side of the bargain here as long as she does.”

“But she doesn’t even want to be here!” Jane said back.

Hermione stifled a groan. They were going to talk about her like she wasn’t there again.

“She agreed to come, not to like it,” Dan said calmly. “We can’t ask her to do more than that.”

Score one for Dad!

There was silence for the rest of the car ride.

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Hermione Granger climbed out of the car, convinced this was going to be the worst summer of her life. She looked up at her Uncle's hotel; tall and imposing, it was a modern-day castle of steel and glass, crafted by the best companies, designed by the best architects. It was a marvel of money and a representation of the kind of service the rich and famous demanded from their travel accommodations.

It would be her home for the next two months.

Every summer, Hermione's mother's family had a reunion.

Usually, Hermione found a reason not to go. Her childhood memories of family reunions were somewhat like Harry's childhood memories of the Dursleys. A lot of people who didn't like her because she wasn't like them that she couldn't escape from; her cousins came from well off or affluent families and were usually decked out in the latest fashions, with the latest gadgets or backpacks or shoes. Hermione could have been just like them if she had wanted to, but her world had always consisted of books and poking her nose into things the adults didn't want her to poke her nose into.

The last time she'd been to a reunion had been right before her third year.

This year, there was no way to avoid it. Just before she'd left for the Burrow to go see the Quidditch World Cup the summer before her fourth year, she and her mother had made a deal. And like most deals between Hermione and her mother, the deal was a written contract.

Hermione would go to the 'big' reunion held in London at her Uncle Richard's hotel the summer before she turned seventeen. She would try to get along with her cousins and try to make nice with her family.

She would try, even if they didn't.

In return, she got to go to the World Cup and she got to spend part of the last summer at Grimmauld Place. There were other parts of the agreement Hermione would hold her mother to – she would be allowed to Owl her friends, if she could find a way to do it without being seen. She would be allowed to keep her wand and she would be allowed to spend a goodly amount of money on books to keep her occupied during the times no one wanted her around.

And one other, almost insignificant, concession on her mother's part; one Hermione knew would never come to pass, but she'd forced it through anyway.

She closed the car door and realized she already missed Hogwarts. She already missed Ron, Harry and Ginny. She would have been grateful for even Neville's company.

I'd even be glad to see Luna. She almost smiled at the thought. Everyone knew she wasn't Luna Lovegood's biggest fan, but after the DA and the Department of Mysteries, Hermione had warmed up to the unusual girl.

Her father helped her sort out her belongings between her two trunks. The new one was just that – new. It didn't look as well worn as her Hogwarts trunk. It was light blue, with gold trim and hinges. Just the sort of thing her mother liked. Hermione didn't say anything as she transferred her Muggle clothes, her diary (it looked Muggle, but was charmed with infinite pages), and the few photos she had of her friends that were suitable for her relatives to see. Colin Creevy had taken quite a few photos over the past four years and had given copies to her, Ron and Harry, but many of those photos were either moving wizarding photos or were of people in situations, clothes and places that clearly revealed the wizarding world. Those stayed in her Hogwarts trunk.

She saw her mother had bought her new clothes for the reunion, and Hermione devoutly hoped at least some of the new clothes were things she would at least be able to tolerate wearing. Usually, when

her mother bought her clothes, they would be too formal or too much like what her cousins wore.

As they closed the new trunk, Dan laid a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, it's gonna be just fine, kiddo. I promise."

Hermione looked up at him. "I can't deal with this if it turns out like last time."

The last time had been the worst summer of her life – but she could feel it in her guts this one was going to be worse.

Trelawney would be proud. I'm seeing the bloody future.

Her father gave her a one-armed hug. "I know. I'll do what I can, but..."

Hermione shook her head. "No. Don't. It'll make it worse. I'll survive this. I've survived worse."

He gave her an unreadable look, and Hermione sighed. She wished she could tell her parents, she really did. But her mother was already so uncomfortable with her being a witch. How could she tell her what she'd been through? That her best friend was a target for a racist madman with dreams of world domination?

It was a strange thing. She wasn't the same girl she had been five years ago. She'd been attacked by a troll, almost eaten by a three-headed dog named Fluffy, played a life-size game of chess, transformed into an anthropomorphic cat, been petrified by a Basilisk, helped solve the murder of Harry's parents, helped Harry win the Triwizard Tournament and battled some of the most evil people alive. She lived in a castle straight out of a faerie tale and was counted amongst the best and brightest in the Wizarding world.

None of it mattered.

In just a few minutes, she would be with her mother's family. Aunts and Uncles and cousins and grandparents who thought she attended

Straghow Preparatory School and considered her a silly, sheltered little girl.

Straghow. The idea of the place still made her smile. McGonagall had told her about it after her first year when she'd been given her final grades. It shouldn't have surprised her that Hogwarts had a cover story for their Muggle-born students to use on friends and family, but she had been. She'd been even more surprised to learn Straghow was well regarded in the academic community.

In a way, it just made dealing with her family even harder, because they had their own notions about the school.

She had known what this summer would bring. She'd known about the reunion for two years, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to talk about it, even with Harry and Ron. This was something they couldn't help her with.

Her father hefted her new trunk, she picked up Crookshanks and they walked into the hotel.

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It started small.

Just a comment here and there. Whispers behind her back as she unpacked. A shove here; an elbow there; a pinch or a foot put in her way when none of the adults who would care were looking. Not that many of the adults paid attention to the 'cousins' — as the eighteen or twenty 'kids' who were teenage or almost teenage were called. They were all crammed, three to a room, along the same hall as the 'little ones'. Ostensibly, so they could help the adults look after the rather large number of smaller children.

Realistically, it was going to be one big party. Which was one of the worst fates Hermione Granger could imagine — and Hermione had endured Snape's detentions for five years.

The comments the adults made amongst themselves, just loud enough that she could hear, were worse.

“So short and...well, she’s just hasn’t filled out...”

“Bookish and freaky, what with that face...I guess she never grew out of it...”

“Some girls grow up and some girls just never do...”

It was even harder to ignore those comments, because most of them were true. Both Rachel and Delilah were tall and willowy and brunette, their straight hair falling over their shoulders in soft waves. Hermione was still short and built very petite.

Unfortunately, none of her cousins wanted to share their space with her any more than she wanted to share her space with them. Why would they want to associate with her, let alone be friends? She didn’t know anything. She’d never heard of the popular bands, or movies or movie stars, or TV shows – to say nothing of her atrocious fashion sense. Everything she wore was woefully dated or worse – like the dreadful knitted sweaters she packed in her trunk.

Her cousins, like Hermione, came from well off or affluent families, but unlike Hermione, were usually decked out in the latest fashions, with the latest gadgets or backpacks or shoes. Hermione could have been just like them if she had wanted to, but her world had always consisted of books and poking her nose into things the adults didn’t want her to poke her nose into.

And it seemed her cousins were determined not to let Hermione forget she didn’t fit in.

The first serious ‘incident’ was while Hermione, Rachel and Delilah were getting moved into their hotel room and ready for dinner. Rachel ‘accidentally’ spilled Delilah’s purple nail polish on Hermione’s only Muggle-safe photo of her, Ron and Harry.

Her mother had just patted her on the shoulder, smiled patronizingly, and said: “Well, then, you shouldn’t have left it out where it could get ruined. And I trust you will graciously accept Rachel’s apology for the accident. These people are your family and you will assume the best

about them. You will be an understanding and gracious young lady. Am I understood?"

Hermione had said nothing. Her mother interpreted silence for acquiescence.

As they got in the car to go to dinner, Jane was gushing. "Can you believe it, Hermione? This is the largest reunion in years! In London, no less! And just think! You'll finally get to spend some time with your cousins, longer than that few weeks before your third year!"

Hermione tried to muster enthusiasm, if only for her mother's sake. But she was emotionally exhausted; she couldn't get it out of her head how she had failed at the Department of Mysteries. Or what was facing the people she had come to love as a family over the past five years. What was facing the world she had chosen as her own.

In the end, she just nodded again, unable to make herself say anything that wouldn't have come out sounding sarcastic.

The restaurant her uncle Richard had chosen was both elegant and expensive. Hermione was sure the food was good, but she didn't recognize most of what was on the menu, though she seemed to be the only one who didn't. She sat staring at the menu, and tentatively ordered one of the few things she recognized.

Her Uncle had her seated between her cousin Blake and his sister Rachel, across from Delilah.

Willowy and tall and brunette, both Rachel and Delilah made hushed comments to Hermione.

"Oh, dear, you don't want to eat that. It's dreadfully fattening. Haven't you read a book or two on that?"

Delilah nodded her agreement, and whispered: "You shouldn't eat so much of that. It does such horrid things to your complexion. Really, you should pay more attention in health class. That is where you'd learn about such things, isn't it?"

Hermione noticed she was the only one of the cousins over the age of thirteen who didn't accept – or ask for – a glass of wine with dinner. She contented herself with water and quietly missed butterbeer and pumpkin juice.

That didn't stop her cousin Blake from accidentally spilling most of a bottle of red wine on her only formal dress – a pale beige and crème colored silk her mother had bought for her after seeing pictures of her from the Yule Ball.

"What? No class in table manners, cousin? How awful for you. I suppose you should buy yourself a book on it. I hear *Eating for Dummies* is all the rage for people who don't get out much."

To Hermione's surprise, her mother blamed her. "Hermione! I thought you'd grown out of all that clumsiness! Didn't anything you learned as a little girl stick? All that money on dance and etiquette and you don't bother to use any of it!"

Hermione just bit her lower lip and looked away from her mother, blinking furiously at the hot tears. I thought I was over this. I thought I'd accepted that I'll never make her proud of me. No matter what I do or what I become, it won't matter. She can't be proud of a witch.

Hermione forced the lump in the back of her throat down with a swallow of water and tried to ignore the ache her mother's words caused. Her father looked at her sympathetically, but didn't say anything. He wouldn't ever contradict Jane in front of people, least of all her family.

She passed on desert; she wasn't hungry anymore. But her Aunt Elizabeth nodded in approval. "Wise, Hermione, wise. With your figure, I wouldn't be eating much desert either."

Hermione smiled thinly, and forced words of thanks out. Her aunt and her mother both beamed at what a polite, well-mannered girl she was being.

Derek, tall and broad shouldered and athletic, tripped on his way out the door and caught himself on Hermione's only purse. The strap

caught on her shoulder and tore the leather; she was knocked over into a puddle just outside the door, soaking her shoes and her dress.

Her mother turned away in shame, and the laughter and comments she heard as she stood up, wiping her scratched hands on her ruined dress. She tucked her purse under arm, and swallowed a bit of blood from where she'd bit her lip when she fell.

She turned away from all of them to compose herself, reaching into her purse to make sure her wand wasn't broken. She breathed a silent sigh of relief when she realized it wasn't.

I guess I'm not a Muggle anymore. She wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry.

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When people with even a moderate amount of money visited London, they went shopping wherever there was shopping to be had. Such was the second day of the reunion.

Her mother made the outing even worse. As they wandered from shop to shop, her mother handed her a credit card. "Hermione, everyone's going swimming at the hotel later tonight. Why don't you buy yourself a new swimsuit?" Her mother had paused, and patted her on the shoulder. "And some new clothes...something a bit more fetching than what you have?"

She wasn't sure if it was the pleading look in her mother's eyes or the snickers of her cousins that stung worse.

Rachel, Delilah, Blake and Derek were all too glad to help. And laugh as she turned bright red at their loud comments.

Delilah's 'help' was invaluabley amusing to the two boys manning the sales counter.

"Oh, Hermi, are you sure you read those numbers right? This isn't math class...these numbers mean something. Maybe try something a few sizes bigger?"

Derek's sage wisdom was such that Hermione found she was unable to speak.

"With your figure, a two piece wouldn't be a smart, I don't think."

That's right. You don't. Hermione almost snapped back, but she bit her tongue instead.

Blake just sneered as she looked through the racks. "What, couldn't find a book to read about swimsuits before you came shopping? Sorry, cousin, not everything comes with an instruction manual."

Hermione hadn't roomed with Lavender and Parvati for five years without learning something. In a fit of pique, she picked a suit off the rack that she would never honestly consider wearing, but by picking it she could prove what they said didn't matter.

Only, while she was in the changing room, Blake and Rachel burst in and ran off with her clothes. Luckily, one of the boys at the sales counter took pity on her and retrieved her clothes – and wouldn't let her cousins back in.

Out of gratitude, Hermione bought several new outfits (of a much more daring style than she would have thought of wearing before) and the swimsuit from him, just to make sure he got a good commission.

She stopped at a few more shops and bought more clothes and jewelry to replace what had gone 'missing' before she finally caught up with the bulk of her family.

And just to avoid having to deal with her cousins again, Hermione Granger did what she never thought she would ever do. She volunteered to take care of the little ones, if only because her cousins wouldn't go anywhere near them.

This, at least, had the benefit of her mother's wholehearted support. Hermione could watch the little ones – all the little ones – while the adults spent money. She found herself wiping runny noses, changing

diapers, kissing skinned knees, and mediating sibling spats while carrying a baby in one arm and pushing a stroller with the other. Of course, this left her open for a whole new range of insults – mostly about her ‘practicing’ for her future career as a single mother.

She missed Ron and Harry with a constant ache that wouldn’t go away; she knew her ‘boys’ (as her mother called them) would have jumped to her defense against even the slightest of the barbs thrown her way – and would have been willing to fight over some of the worst. The twins would have shown her cousins what practical jokes really were – to say nothing of what Ginny would have wreaked upon them. She missed the quiet camaraderie of the Gryffindor common room; of curling up with a book in one of the cushy armchairs next to the fire while Ginny watched Ron trounce Harry at game after game of Wizard Chess. She missed shopping in Hogsmeade and in Diagon Alley.

Every time she took the children into a toy store or candy store, she thought of Zonko’s and the Weasley twins, and Honeyduke’s. She wanted Ron to be pointing out every variety of sweet to her, asking her to try a bit of this or a bit of that.

She smiled to herself at the thought. Even when he was mad at her (discounting their major spat third year) Ron was always attentive, even if it was just to pick at her. There was a childish part of her who wanted to scream at her cousins ‘leave me alone or my friends will come beat you up!’...and there was another part of her that didn’t know why she couldn’t stop thinking of Ronald Weasley.

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The third day, Hermione and her mother were standing outside, so Jane could lecture her daughter out of the public eye, when Hedwig landed next to them.

Jane glared at Hermione. “Hermione! Get the letter off that owl and send it on its way! It can’t be seen! We don’t have the answers to give them!”

Gritting her teeth, Hermione took the letter from Hedwig.

As she ran her hand over the owl's head and back, she found herself blinking back tears. Hedwig was the only creature from the wizarding world she'd laid eyes on all summer, and Harry's normally rather stand-offish owl was surprisingly affectionate, pressing against her hand and nipping at her.

When Hermione stopped to look at the letter and saw it was from Ron – he must have borrowed Hedwig from Harry...I wonder why he didn't use Pig? -Her mother rushed over and shooed Hedwig away with her pruse.

"Mother!" Hermione stared at her mother with an incredulous expression, but Jane Granger folded her arms across her chest and sighed.

"Hermione, we can't let them know anything about who you really are."

Hermione bit her tongue again. No, we wouldn't want that, now would we?

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Unfortunately, Hermione wasn't able to read Ron's letter.

She had to go swimming with the little ones. In the afternoon after shopping and sightseeing, the family gathered at the hotel to go swimming. The first day, she wore a dark t-shirt and shorts over her new bikini, but after an evening of mocking catcalls and comments like 'well, I wouldn't want to show that body in a swimsuit, either', Hermione changed her mind.

After all, most of her female relatives, from her cousins to her aunts and her mother's cousins wore swimsuits that were just shy of being indecent – and more than a few of the women from the Continent had to be reminded to wear bathing tops.

The second afternoon they went swimming, Hermione forewent the shirt and shorts.

The neon blue bikini was nearly indecent; the top was just two small triangles of cloth and a few loops of string; the bottom wasn't much better.

She knew she was blushing brightly as she led the little ones out to the shallow end of the pool, but she would show them who they were afraid!

The immediate gaping mouths and stunned shock on the faces of every male above the age of twelve and below the age of thirty sent a thrill of satisfaction through her. As if she weren't being watched by almost everyone there, she got the little ones smeared with sunscreen (she'd done herself back at the house) and into their various flotation devices, passed out the pool toys, and lowered herself into the water to sit on the steps and keep vigil over her charges.

She'd been there less than a minute when strong fingers wrapped around her upper arm and yanked her painfully to her feet.

"Hermione Jane Granger, just what do you think you are doing wearing that?"

She heard snickering behind her; all of her cousins – in fact, most everyone at the pool – had stopped to witness Hermione's mother dress her down.

"It's a bathing suit, mother. I bought it a few days ago." Her voice was cold, with a snide edge she never would have thought about using on her mother just a few days before.

Her mother pulled her close, her fingers digging into her arm whispering: "What in the blazes is wrong with you, Hermione?"

"Nothing, obviously." Hermione spoke loudly enough everyone could hear. "No one seems to have a problem with what they're seeing but you."

She saw a few of the older men cough and turn away.

“How dare you act like such...such a...”

“Normal girl?” Hermione interrupted her mother. “What I’m wearing is a good bit more decent than some of my beloved cousins and a few women more than twice my age.”

Her mother practically dragged her back into the hotel lobby. “All right, daughter-mine. I know enough about psychology to know a cry for attention when I hear one. I know we haven’t gotten to spend much quality time together, but this is the first time I’ve ever been able to host a reunion...”

Hermione’s glare cut her mother’s stream of patronizing platitudes off.

“A cry for attention?” Her voice was icily incredulous. “Is that what you think? No mother, I have had entirely too much attention. This,” she gestured to her swimsuit, “is an attempt to change the nature of that attention. A surprise change in my behavior to cause them to shut up for a few minutes while they try to kick-start their pedestrian minds into coming up with some new material.”

Hermione’s mother took a deep breath and glared daggers at her daughter. “Now you listen here, young lady. Those people are your relatives, and I will not tolerate you speaking of them that way.”

“No.” Hermione swallowed a thick lump in the back of her throat, and tried desperately not to cry. “You will just tolerate them speaking of your daughter any way they please.”

Her mother blanched as Hermione’s words struck home. “Hermione, they’re younger than you and...”

Hermione shook her head. “Mother, more than half of them are my age or older.”

Dr Granger looked pleadingly at her daughter. “Can’t you at least try to get along with them, be a little like them? You’re not going to live at that school forever, and you’ll need friends to fall back on when you

go to college and start your own family.”

Hermione stared at her mother in stunned disbelief. How can she think I want to live in the Muggle world? My life is based around the study of magic...my life is magical.

She didn't even try to stop the tears this time.

“Fine.” Her mother sighed. “If you're going to be a big baby about it, then I'll just have to send you home. Wait right here, little girl. Don't you move.” Her mother's voice was icy and stern, but Hermione couldn't have moved if she wanted to.

Hermione was still frozen in place when her mother stormed back inside and thrust Hermione's backpack at her.

“Your father and I have been discussing this since the family arrived and you started acting like such a brat. You are not going back to that school. We are going to enroll you in a proper school. This witch and wizard bit may be very, very real, Hermione, but you were born into a world where none of that exists, and it's time you started living in it.”

She paused, as if to give Hermione a chance to argue.

“Now, you have the credit card your father and I gave you for emergencies in there, as well as all the cash we had between us. Go upstairs, get dressed, and go buy yourself a decent swimsuit.”

Hermione didn't say anything; she just slung her backpack over her shoulder.

“Once you have a decent swimsuit, I expect to see you back here by dinner to help with the little ones. Get lunch while you're out. No one wants you or your attitude spoiling our meal.”

Hermione gave her mother a forced smile. Of course you don't want me. I'm not like them. Or you.

Hermione wished she'd possessed the good sense to at least wrap herself in a towel when she'd stormed through the hotel lobby.

At first, she'd been too angry to think about what she was doing, but by the time she was nearly to the elevators (meaning she had walked past the small café and coffee shop, the main restaurant and the business area) she realized that all she was wearing was a skimpy swimsuit and a backpack.

She had never been so embarrassed in her life.

No matter how much she missed them, she was glad 'her boys' weren't there with her.

If they'd been here I wouldn't have ever done something so stupid!

Though there was a small voice in the back of her mind that wondered what Ron would say if he saw her in the bikini.

He'd probably be mad at me for wearing it... For some reason, the thought of Ron not wanting her to flaunt herself was both comforting and bothersome.

Tears stung her eyes, but she would not cry or acknowledge her furious blush to the cabbie. She was Gryffindor, damn it, and she would brave this the same way she braved Death Eaters.

It was the longest elevator ride of Hermione Granger's life.

By the time she reached her room, she was sure she would die of mortification. She quickly dashed down the hall, intending to change, grab a couple of books, and spend the day on the roof, reading.

Her determination faded as she slid the card key into the door.

Fine. They win. I'll be the quiet, mousy little bookworm babysitter and let them mock me. If my own mother thinks so little of me, of who and what I am, then what's the point in trying?

She closed and locked the door behind her and rested her forehead against the door.

What was I thinking? No matter what I do, I'll never be one of them. I'll never be anything to anyone except Hermione the insufferable know-it-all.

All I have to do is survive this reunion and then find a way back to the wizarding world.

She knew all she had to do was wait until September, when she turned seventeen. She'd call the Knight Bus and go to the Burrow. Molly and Arthur Weasley would help her get back to Hogwarts. She'd be late, of course, but she could make up the coursework.

Tears ran down her face. She was having to choose between her friends, her world – almost everything that mattered, that made her who she was – and her family. Somehow, she knew if she went back to Hogwarts, she would never be welcome at home again. I'll find a way to manage. At least at Hogwarts I won't be alone.

"Ahem."

Hermione jumped and made an undignified squeak as she put her back to the door, grabbing her wand from her backpack.

And to her eternal mortification, met the bemused faces of her Headmaster and Head of House.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger," Professor Dumbledore said amicably. "Once you have decided not to hex or otherwise bespell us, Professor McGonagall and I would like to speak with you." His blue eyes twinkled brightly. "We can, of course, wait while you change into something less suited for aquatic adventure."

Hermione lowered her head and closed her eyes. This was going to be a long day.

End Chapter

CHAPTER NINE

Decisions

"I can't."

Hermione had never hated saying anything more than she hated saying that to Professor Dumbledore. She stared down into her tea, and bit her lower lip, cursing herself for feeling like she was going to cry again.

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips. "Miss Granger, am I to understand that after all your protests about being left out and having a right to be involved, you are refusing an offer to join the Order?"

Hermione sucked in a breath, and blinked away the tears. She gritted her teeth. "Yes, Professor. You understand correctly."

McGonagall fixed Hermione with a stern gaze, every bit the strict and disapproving professor. "No, Miss Granger, I do not understand at all. Perhaps you would care to explain?"

She took a deep breath, wishing she had something she could get up and do while she gathered her thoughts. But there wasn't really anything; she had run into the bathroom to change (she'd thrown clothes on over the bathing suit) and come out to find the Professors sitting at the room's single small table, having conjured an attractive little tea service.

"My mother has decided I am not going back to Hogwarts." She was having to force every word out.

"I see," McGonagall said, very stiff and correct. "And you intend to obey this edict?"

Hermione visibly winced, her mother's parting comments still stinging. She still could not bring herself to look up at them. My first chance to really help, to really be involved...and I can't.

She wanted to scream or cry or both.

“No, Professor. But by law, I can’t do anything about it until I turn seventeen.” Hermione sat motionless, and stared into her tea, wondering what Professor Trelawney would have seen in the bottom of her cup.

Professor Dumbledore sighed. “Miss Granger, for reasons we cannot yet discuss with you, we cannot extend the same offer to Mister Potter or Mister Weasley. You are, perhaps, the only person who can undertake this task – which, I believe is vital to the defeat of Lord Voldemort. Please reconsider very carefully what we are asking.”

Hermione took a sip of tea to force the lump back down her throat, and decided to make sure she understood what they were asking her to do.

“You want me to pack up and go with Professor McGonagall to Bulgaria to help convince the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic to clandestinely help support the Order of the Phoenix, trading on my relationship with Victor Krum for a cover story. Without telling my parents where I’m going or what I’m doing and in blatant, illegal defiance of their wishes.”

In other words, I’m useless except that a Quidditch star took me to a dance. And you want me to give up my family because of it.

“Yes, Miss Granger. That is what we wish you to do. Your experiences assisting Mr Potter and confronting the Dark Arts makes your understanding of the current situation far more comprehensive than most non-Auror members of the Order.”

Hermione flushed with the praise, and found herself hating even more that she was going to have to refuse them.

“My family...”

She couldn’t finish the statement. She forced another swallow of tea down her throat. Harry would jump at this...he has no reason not to. Ron would too, even if his family didn’t want him to.

Hermione tried to speak again, but no words came out. She quickly took another swallow of tea.

At least Ron's family wants him around for more than just appearances.

Her stomach clenched. Harry and Ron accepted her, stood up for her. They were her friends, and even if her own family were to turn her out completely, she would never lack for a home or people to take her in. Molly and Arthur Weasley would take her in as quickly as they did Harry.

How can I look Harry or Ron in the eyes if I sit here and do nothing? I'm not wanted or needed here. They don't want me or even like me. I can do something real, something solid this time. Even if it is just provide a cover story.

And I will be a part of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Miss Granger," McGonagall began, "there are some things more important than family or even friends."

They'll never notice I'm gone.

"I'll do it." Hermione cut her off, looking up, brown eyes bright with determination.

Professor Dumbledore smiled and patted her hand. "Thank you, Hermione."

The girl blinked, surprised that Professor Dumbledore had called her by her first name.

The old wizard smiled. "Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix."

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Hermione was able to pack most of what she needed into her backpack in less than ten minutes. Crookshanks was not only willing,

but eager to jump into his carrier; he wasn't enjoying the family reunion any more than Hermione was.

"I'm ready, Professors."

"That was impressively efficient, even for you, Miss Granger," Dumbledore remarked with a smile. "However, I doubt you are able to fit all of your wizarding accoutrements in that single backpack?"

Hermione looked a bit embarrassed. "I'm afraid I don't know how we'll get my Hogwarts things...my parents locked them up in their room."

"Ahh." Dumbledore nodded. "I am sure we can find a way, Miss Granger, but for the moment, we must discuss the details of your trip. Though your association with Victor Krum is, in fact, important to what we wish to accomplish, it is not your 'cover story'."

"It's not?" Hermione tilted her head to one side, looking more than a little confused. "But..."

Dumbledore held up a hand. "I think it would be best, Miss Granger, were we to find a better locale to discuss the arrangements. There is no sense in risking discovery by your relatives."

With a wave of his wand, the conjured tea service was transfigured into a tall staff of white oak, which flew to Dumbledore's hand.

"Ladies, if you would?"

McGonagall and Hermione touched the staff, and felt the familiar jerk behind their navels as the Portkey activated and sent them whirling into Dumbledore's office.

Somehow – maybe it was traveling with Dumbledore – they all arrived on their feet.

"Please, sit." The Headmaster walked behind his desk and sat. "Sherbert lemon?"

"No, thanks..." Hermione muttered as she stared around the office. Unlike Harry, she had never found herself there. The large and circular room was beautifully antique, with portraits of former Headmasters and Headmistresses, many of them asleep. All around the room, there were various silver instruments buzzing and chiming away, occasionally emitting the odd puff or two of smoke.

Dumbledore chuckled as Hermione sat, her eyes drawn to the many shelves of old books of magic and history.

"Admiring my library, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore smiled. "I believe I can part with a few to keep you occupied on your trip to Bulgaria."

Hermione managed to blush, look abashed and eager all at the same time. "Thank you, Professor!"

"You are quite welcome, Miss Granger. Now, as to the details of that trip. There is no need for a cover story, because Professor McGonagall is escorting you on an academic study based on your excellent performance all five of your years at Hogwarts, breaking most of the established academic records."

Hermione, though having the grace to look somewhat embarrassed, beamed under the praise. And as excited as she was, she didn't fail to notice that McGonagall looked almost as excited as she was. "Academic study? Bulgarian culture and history? Or magical techniques native to the region?"

"Calmly, Miss Granger. You will be accompanying Professor McGonagall to the conference on advanced transfiguration theory and application the Bulgarian Ministry is hosting. The conference will last two weeks, but that will be more than enough time for you and Minerva to lay the groundwork for the Order's mission." Dumbledore slid an envelope across to her. "Your wizarding passport, your conference confirmation, and the information concerning the conference itself is here."

Hermione was having trouble speaking. Her eyes were wide, and she was gaping at the envelope as if she couldn't believe what was happening.

Transfiguration conference? With Professor McGonagall? Member of the Order of the Phoenix? Borrowing Dumbledore's books? But there was one thought that brought her back down to earth. I'm only sixteen. I'll only be able to watch and study, not actually practice magic.

The thought was sobering enough for her to come out of her shock. Shaking her head, she motioned for Professor Dumbledore to pause for a moment.

"What am I going to do about money? What are our lodgings? Who are our contacts? What kind of groundwork do we need to put in place? What kind of support does the Order need? How are we going to attend the conference at the same time we're laying this groundwork? And if I'm only a student, how am I going to be able to help? What about my parents? Once they realize I'm missing, they'll call the Muggle authorities! Oh! My wizarding things are still in their room! Once those are gone, they will really worry! And what does Victor have to do with any of this?" When Hermione paused for a breath, Dumbledore pushed a goblet of pumpkin juice (that hadn't been there a moment before) across the desk to her.

"Your parents will be told you are going on a Hogwarts-sponsored trip to a magical conference. They will not be told where. The Order shall provide you with expense money for food, the conference, and Order-related business. You and Minerva will attend at Durmstrang, as it is, of course, the location of the conference. As the guest list is extensive and international, it is the perfect arena for your mission. Mr Krum is one of the wizards assisting their new headmistress in planning and coordinating the event and is your primary contact."

Hermione put down the goblet, and opened her mouth. Before sound could come out, there was a soft pop and her Hogwarts trunk appeared with Dobby sitting atop it. The house elf leapt off the trunk and into a flying hug, nearly knocking Hermione and her chair over.

"Dobby is getting Harry Potter's Hermione's trunk because Professor Dumbledore said she would only be happy if a free elf did it! And Dobby is a free elf!"

Hermione laughed and hugged Dobby back. "Professor Dumbledore is a very wise wizard."

Dumbledore smiled at Hermione. "As you can see, Miss Granger, many of your questions have already been answered. The rest will be answered later, once you and Minerva have had time to converse." He steepled his long fingers and looked at her. "I am afraid that this will likely be the last time I see you before the beginning of Hogwarts' next term. I will be, regrettably, out of contact for quite some time."

Hermione pursed her lips and nodded. "I'm sure Professor McGonagall and I can manage on our own. But...what do I tell the others?"

Professor Dumbledore's smile was an infinitely sad expression, devoid of the reassurance and comfort that usually came with what was supposed to be a positive expression.

"You may tell them whatever you wish, Hermione."

Her first reaction was to grin. Ron and Harry would be so excited to know that at least one of them was a member of the Order. Ron would be jealous she was going to Bulgaria...and for the first time she felt guilty about allowing him to feel that.

But I can tell him this is only for Order business.

Her face fell as she began to understand. Dumbledore was giving her a choice: if she told Harry and Ron, she might compromise what the Order was trying to do.

"But I can't, can I?" Her voice was a whisper.

Dumbledore slid parchment, quill and ink across his desk to her.

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Ron Weasley was bored.

It was late evening. Dinner was over and the dishes done. Chores were finished, and to his surprise, he missed having summer homework – at least then he'd have something to do.

Instead, he was sitting in silence on the back porch with his sister, thinking. He kept replaying the battle in the Department of Mysteries over and over in his head, seeing what he – and everyone – could have done better.

We didn't have a plan. We almost never do. Without Harry, we'd all be dead. It was too damn close this time.

The thought chilled him. Other thoughts competed with it, thoughts he didn't want to be ready to acknowledge.

The next time we might not be so lucky. We really don't have all that much time, not to do the important things.

He had made a horrible mistake his fourth year, both because he hadn't been willing to think about something that seemed trivial – who to take to the Yule Ball – and why he wanted to take them. He had compounded that mistake by speaking before thinking and by possibly destroying his only chance to do something truly wonderful.

He'd had a year to think about it and come to some conclusions about himself, about what he wanted out of life that he had never expected.

I have to tell her how I feel. As soon as I can.

His resolve wavered in the face of his fear; it had every day since he'd woken up in Hogwarts' infirmary with Hermione in the bed next to him.

I don't have the words, not the right ones. I never do.

He'd already written her one letter. He'd tried to tell her, but no matter how he tried to say it, the words didn't convey how he felt. He'd ended up with a stilted letter full of half-completed thoughts.

At least I managed to tell her I missed her. He knew what he wanted to say, but not how to say it. Maybe the 'how' isn't as important as the 'what' this time.

He was about to stand up, to go write the letter he was afraid to write, when his mother bustled out the back door.

"Ron! Ginny! Letters for you from Hermione! They just got here!"

Smiling at the first bit of good news he'd had since finding out almost everyone had made it out of the Department of Mysteries, Ron eagerly took the letter from his mother's hand and tore open the envelope. Her letter was a perfect opportunity; he'd write her back and he'd tell her. Even if he couldn't find the right words.

He unfolded her letter, smiling at the straight lines and clean, precise handwriting. The letter smelled like her – like lavender and honey and ink.

Ginny looked bemused as she stood and took her letter up to her room – probably to get better light to read it by. He barely noticed as she left.

After Ron read Hermione's letter, he folded it back up and slid it into his pocket. He leaned back against one of the wooden posts holding the roof over the porch and stared into the fading sunlight. He didn't realize how long he'd been sitting there until Remus Lupin sat down next to him.

The former Defense professor had abandoned his usual tattered gray robes for long, loose slacks, t-shirt, boots and – despite summer's heat - a much-abused olive green cloth jacket.

"You know, I've always liked watching the night sky during the new moon. But I hardly expected to find you out here this late."

Ron forced a smile, and looked over at his former Professor. He shrugged. "Believe it or not, I'm thinking."

Remus chuckled quietly. "I've seen you play chess too often to believe you don't think, Ron. Though I doubt it's one of your favorite pastimes."

The redhead raked his hand through his hair. "Not really. But a guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do, you know?"

Remus nodded, his face a silhouette in the waning light. "I know. What are you thinking about?"

Ron was silent for a long moment. "Heroes."

"Heroes?" Remus asked, somewhat surprised. His voice was soft, but intense. "That can be some deep thinking. Care to share?"

The youngest Weasley boy shrugged. "What makes a hero? People like Harry are heroes because they have to be. People like you are heroes because they chose to be. But what about the people we call heroes, like sports stars and media figures? What makes them heroes?"

"I wouldn't call myself a hero, Ron, though I will take the compliment in the spirit it was intended. I think those people are heroes because they represent something that we respect or covet. They give us a goal, a direction – a role model, I suppose."

Ron nodded. "That makes sense. Most of my life, I've wanted to be a hero. I've had a lot of heroes to look up to. I've wanted to be Quidditch Captain, to be Head Boy, to be a famous Auror. But heroes have to sacrifice something to be heroes, don't they? That's the burden of being a hero."

Lupin nodded, pulled his jacket around himself and looked at his former student.

In the dying sunlight, Ron's hair was glowing as if his head were capped with unruly fire, almost but not quite tamed – it seemed to somehow reflect his inner turmoil.

"This is a very strange line of thought, Ron. I have to admit, I never thought I would be having this discussion with you. Harry, yes, but not with you."

Ron smiled, the expression only slightly bitter. "That's because I'm not a hero. I've never wanted to pay the price. I still don't."

"Don't cut yourself short, Ron." Remus smiled back, uncertain how to reassure the boy.

"No." Ron spoke with more confidence than Remus had ever heard from him. "No, I'm not a hero. And I think I like it that way. People aren't heroes just because they sacrifice something. They're heroes because they have the ability to do something that other people don't. The sacrifice comes when they make the choice to do that thing. Every person has their own gifts, their own abilities, right?"

"Yes, I'd say so." Remus had fixed Ron with a very intense gaze, but Ron didn't seem to notice. Lupin had always seemed intense to him. He turned and looked at the werewolf. "That's why you're here, at my house, with the Order. You're very good at using magic to fight and to protect, and so you're doing it, right? Even if you were good at something else, or had another job or somewhere else to be, you'd still be here, doing this."

Lupin nodded again. "You're surprisingly perceptive, Ron."

"Eh," he shrugged, "it's a fluke. Just for tonight." He looked away again. "Most people choose to do something they're good at. Bill is good at everything except being happy. Charlie is good with animals, especially dragons. Percy is good at knowing things, at making the system work. Fred and George are good at creating things, especially laughter. Harry is good at magic and saving people, and Hermione is good at absorbing, comprehending and using vast amounts of information."

Remus pursed his lips. "Are you saying you don't know what your particular gift is?"

He shook his head. "No. I know what I'm good at, but it means I'll probably never be a hero. But there's no shame in that, and I think I'm beginning to understand that for every hero, there has to be people like me, or they'd never be able to handle being a hero."

"You don't sound as if this bothers you, Ron, but I'm not sure if you're selling yourself short or having a moment of supreme maturity."

"Probably both," Ron answered with a sigh as he stood up. "Thanks, Professor. Things make some sense now."

"I'm glad I could help, Ron. And it's Remus. You're not my student anymore."

Looking sheepish, Ron shook his head as he walked back inside. "Mum'd kill me if I called you Remus, and 'Mr Lupin' just doesn't sound right. Sorry, Professor."

Ron trudged upstairs to his room. If I'm not a hero, then what am I?

The answer seemed obvious. Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape weren't the only people to point it out to him, but they had been by far the most vocal. A sidekick. And what's wrong with that?

Nothing. Except Harry wouldn't stand for having a sidekick. He had enough trouble accepting that he was a hero, let alone that his best friend was going to call himself a sidekick.

But I'm not his partner. Harry doesn't need or want a partner, not for this. Even if he did, I'm not the right guy for the job. He shrugged mentally. Doesn't mean I'm not in this fight for the long haul or that I won't be right there beside him the whole way. Hermione and I aren't going to abandon him, even if he is a prat lately.

Hermione. Her again.

Ron sat down at his desk, and spread out the parchment.

Ron,

I hope things are going well for you this summer! I can't believe it's already been a week. My family is driving me insane...I wish you and Harry were here to keep me company!

I won't be trapped here long, though. In the next day or so, I'm finally going to get to go to Bulgaria and see Victor! He's doing a summer project at Durmstrang, so I'll probably be staying there. I know how you feel about Victor, Ron. I know how you feel about our relationship, and I don't agree with you on it. Because you are one of my best friends – really, one of my only real friends - I'm not going to lie to you about where I'm going this summer, even though it will upset you.

I am going to ask that you don't write me. I think until I can figure out things between Victor and I, angry letters from you are the last thing I need. Anything you write to me, I will send back, unopened. This summer is my time to have something for me, and I won't let your anger and jealousy ruin it, and hopefully it won't ruin our friendship. If there is something you absolutely have to tell me, send it through Ginny or Harry.

I'm not mad at you or trying to hurt you with this. I just think it's best not to antagonize each other over this right now.

Love from,

Hermione

At first, Ron had wanted to write her anyway. But what good would it do? She wasn't going to read anything he wrote...

I'm going to. I'm going to say how I feel. If she reads it, she reads it. If she doesn't, she doesn't. At least I've given it one last try, even though she's made it pretty clear she only thinks of me as a friend.

He pulled out parchment and ink and wrote his letter, and set it with the handful of envelopes Hedwig would be taking out in just a couple of hours. (The Order preferred Owl Post to come and go by night.)

Ron Weasley went to bed with a strange sense of calm.

Even if I had asked her first and without being a prat, she would have said no. I am not who she wants to be with. I have to accept that, and move on.

Forcefully, he shoved thoughts of Hermione, and Krum and things he couldn't undo out of his head as he climbed into bed. It was still early for him, but he was going to need his sleep.

I don't know what I'm going to do with my life, but I know what I can't do. That's a place to start.

End Chapter

LETTERS III

Ginny was fairly sure she was going to end up regretting all of her late nights, but late night was the only time Owl Post came from or arrived at the Burrow and she wouldn't be caught asleep if a letter from Harry came. She'd overheard members of the Order talking, and if they could, they were going to intercept letters to and from Harry.

Over my dead body. He deserves some privacy. For that matter, so do I.

The youngest Weasley was sitting on the tiny ledge outside her window, waiting. This time, at least, her patience had a reward. Hedwig landed next to her, and dropped the letter in her lap. The snowy owl hooted mournfully, looking as despondent as Ginny felt.

"I know. I miss him too. But don't you dare tell anyone."

She wondered if Harry had conversations with Hedwig like she did. The owl was better company than most of her family and all but a couple of members of the Order.

She climbed back into her room and lit a small candle by her bed. The flickering orange light made Harry's dark green ink appear black, but his handwriting was surprisingly clear, which meant he had spent some time writing his reply.

To her surprise, the letter wasn't written on parchment, but on white paper much thinner than parchment, with pale blue lines running across the page, and a red line creating a vertical column on the right side. She'd never seen paper like it.

Ginny,

You didn't make me upset with anything you said. I wish more people would be honest with me instead of tiptoeing around and not telling me things all the time. Half the reason I get upset when people tell me things is because I should have been told those things a long time ago! How can I know what to do when no one will tell me what's going on? Either with Cho Chang or Hermione or Ron or anyone!

So before that rant goes all over the place and I throw all kinds of stuff that's not your problem at you, I just want to say again to please be honest with me. Tell me what you think, what you feel, what you want from me. I can deal better with that than I can with guessing. Trust me, I'm stupid when it comes to people. I'm almost always wrong. (Then again, to hear Hermione and Ron, I never figure anything out until it's time for me to do my 'saving people thing.') Only I haven't been very good at that lately.

That's probably why I've never thought about things like you do. I've never thought about being judged for my actions or my words. Growing up, neither mattered. It only mattered who I was, which was defined mostly by who I wasn't and who my parents were. In a way, I never got over that. I still think of things that way. You're a Weasley, which means you're one of the good guys, one of my friends. Even Percy is still a Weasley in my head. He's not working for Voldemort, he's only doing what he thinks he's supposed to do. Which is what all of us are doing, really. In a lot of ways, Snape and the Dursleys are the same. They blame me for being born, for being me, and punish me for it. It's nothing I had control over, nothing I can fix. And sometimes, if it meant people would just leave me alone and let me be, not torment me for being born or for being me, then I would gladly be someone else.

If your theory about being judged by your actions is right, then you're not being judged right if people judge you based on what you did while possessed by Tom Riddle. Those actions weren't Ginny, they were Tom Riddle. The actions that were Ginny are actions to be proud of. Resisting a powerful dark wizard that's defied death, to the point of almost being able to tell people what was going on, or to break away from him. Don't think that 'almost' means something bad, either, Ginevra Weasley! Dumbledore was able to 'almost' defeat Voldemort. I was able to 'almost' throw Voldemort out of my head. 'Almost' means something when you're playing in his league. It's like one of us almost beating Victor Krum to the Snitch or something.

I don't think judging people on just actions is fair either, because words and actions that don't match can be just as bad or worse than judging them on words or on actions they didn't take. Look at Lucius

Malfoy. He said 'I am not a Death Eater' and he gave money to good causes and claimed to have been acting under the Imperius Curse. But he comes from a long line of dark wizards and is the head of a family renowned for their collection of artifacts relating to Dark Arts.

I don't know. That not knowing is the biggest part of the fear Voldemort likes to create, what he created before and what he wants to do again.

I know why people didn't believe me. If they believed me, and Voldemort was back and coming after me, then that means I was no longer a savior, but a hope. A savior is someone who has already done the deed. A hope is something that can be killed. I don't want to be people's hope. It's too big for me. But I am, because my mother sacrificed everything for me.

Love, Dumbledore said. Love is what protected me from him, turned the Killing Curse back against him. But I don't understand love very well. I couldn't figure out love with Cho Chang...if I can't figure out love, then how can I ever understand what my mother did for me?

I think in the end it's a good thing that Cho and I didn't work out. People like you, Ron, Hermione...you'll fall in love, get married, have children. I don't think that's what's in store for me. Maybe I've heard too many of Trelawney's predictions, but I think that what I am now, what I do now is what I am and will do for the rest of my life.

If I didn't make you want to hit me, write me back. It's good to hear from people, and Ron and Hermione aren't writing. Again.

Harry Potter

P.S. Go shopping. Spend some of my money. All of you Weasleys, and Remus Lupin if he's there! I have too much of it. You deserve it.

I'm okay. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it! (The letters help keep me okay, so...thank you for writing.)

And thank you for the glove. It's helped.

Ginny closed her eyes and rested her forehead against her bedpost. How can he think some of those things?

As worried about him as she was, there was a glimmer of hope and excitement. Harry Potter had opened up to her, trusted her. And he wanted her to write him.

How did he figure out I sent him the glove?

End Chapter

CHAPTER TEN

Ron Shrugged

The morning after Hermione's letters arrived, Ron Weasley was awake, showered, shaved and dressed before the sun rose.

He had a plan.

Ron rarely made plans, except when he was playing chess, and he was arguably a master of the game.

But in light of what Hermione had written, he felt the need for a plan. For something to do.

In a way, I was just waiting for her. Waiting for her to tell me what to do, how to do it. Just like she always does. Odd. I think Harry is the only person who never tried to tell me what to do.

He'd been stupid to wait. He should have done something. He should have told her.

How could I tell her? I didn't know myself until third year. Until we went to Hogsmeade together. Then we were fighting. Then there was Krum.

He knew they were just excuses. If he'd been more of a Gryffindor, he would have found a way to tell her. To find out how she felt.

Would things be any different? She wants to be with Victor-bloody-Krum. Would that have changed if I'd asked her to the dance or kissed her in Hogsmeade?

He didn't know. There was no real way for him to know. He'd sent her a letter, telling her how he felt, but he also know she would never read it. Too little, too late.

I have to accept it. Move on. Be her friend. But I can't wait for her to tell me what to do anymore.

Thus, his plan.

It was frightening, knowing he what he was about to start doing. This was no one else's idea; just his. He had thought it through – like a good chess player, he'd made a plan that worked for both the long and the short term, and had options if the first few moves didn't work out.

I'm just putting this off.

He stole silently downstairs, deftly avoiding causing the rickety stairs to creak and grown with the ease of long practice. He slipped past Tonks passed out on the couch and Ginny curled up asleep in an armchair next to the fire, and crept into the kitchen.

The opening move was always the most important; everything that happened next snowballed from it, whether they were for good or ill. Taking the first move in chess meant counting on a certain level of assumption about how things would go. Ron's opening move was no different.

Blue eyes flicked from one part of the Burrow's well-worn kitchen to another; stained cabinets, floors and counters. Drawers and doors that didn't quite close anymore. Pots and pans without proper places to go. Molding and floorboards peeling away from their walls. A dented, dinged and scratched sink that looked more like the survivor of a battlefield than a kitchen appliance.

It was just what he expected. Just what he wanted, really – the worse off the kitchen was, the better the opening move would be. It didn't take him long to gather what he needed and get started.

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Ron was so intent on what he was doing that he didn't notice a pair of brandy-brown eyes watching him from the living room.

The owner of those eyes couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Her brother, Ronald Bilius Weasley – possibly the only person who could vie with Fred and George for ‘laziest person alive’ – was awake, dressed and cleaning the kitchen.

Without magic.

And doing a very good job of it, too.

“Ron?” Ginny asked.

He grunted in reply.

“What are you doing?”

“Cleaning.” He was working with an efficiency and skill Ginny would never have expected out of him.

I guess all those detentions cleaning Snape’s classroom have done him some good.

Ginny slid out of her chair and yawned, walking into the kitchen.
“Okay. I’ll bite. Why?”

Ron didn’t stop working. “I’m bored. I wanted to do something productive.”

“Ron?” Ginny asked in her sweetest voice.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Fine,” Ron grunted. “Don’t believe me, then.”

“I don’t.” Ginny crossed her arms over her chest and glared at her brother. “This is about Hermione, isn’t it? She told me what she wrote you, you know.”

A brief flash of anger crossed his features, but vanished as quickly as it came. “Right then. You’re a smart girl. You figured it out.”

Ron wiped sweat off his forehead and looked at the kitchen with a satisfied nod.

He started putting cleaning supplies away.

Ginny stalked over to her brother, mentally cursing as she realized she only came as high as his sternum. I hate being short.

“Cleaning the kitchen won’t make her change her mind.”

Ron shrugged, and looked down at her. “I didn’t think it would.”

Ginny put her hands on her hips and glared hard at her brother. “Ronald Weasley, you will tell me what’s going on!”

Ron smiled at her. “Sorry. No. And Mum’s the only girl I know who’s intimidating in pajamas.”

Ginny blushed, but she wasn’t going to let Ron pull her off track. She’d seen him do it to Hermione countless times when there was something he didn’t want to discuss.

”You’re not getting out of this!”

“I just did.”

He went back into the kitchen, leaving her standing in the middle of the dining area in her nightgown, hands on her hips.

She stood there and glared at him as he started water for tea and coffee. It took him a few minutes to figure out how to make the coffee (which he thought smelled much better than it tasted), but he eventually figured it out. He set out the mugs the members of the Order had either claimed as theirs or left at the Burrow and was about to start setting the table when he heard a thud as Tonks fell off the couch.

Cursing, she stood, untangling herself from her sheets.

“Morning, Tonks!” Ron shot over his shoulder as he set out plates.

“Wotcher.” Tonks rubbed her eyes, untangling herself from her bedclothes. “Is that coffee I smell?”

“I think so.” Ron shrugged. “My first time making it, so no promises.”

Tonks staggered into the kitchen, somehow managing to fix herself coffee without breaking anything. “Bad coffee is better than no coffee.” She took an experimental sip. “And good coffee means a good day. Not bad for your first batch.”

“Thanks.” Ron glanced at his watch and side-stepped past Ginny, back to the tea kettle.

Tonks peered over at Ginny. “What happened to her? Someone petrify her or something?”

Ron shook his head and handed his sister a cup of tea. “She’s just trying to intimidate me into telling her something.”

Tonks shrugged. “She’s too small and pretty to be scary in a nightgown.”

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Molly Weasley overslept.

For the first time since being pregnant with the twins, Molly hadn’t woken up when her husband did. She glanced over and saw Arthur’s side of their bed hadn’t been slept in.

He never came home last night. She knew he’d been working late; with Dumbledore away for the summer, he’d been needed more and more at the Ministry, but he hadn’t been gone overnight since the final months of the last war.

Forcefully ignoring the cold fear for her husband and children – Arthur is just fine. I would have heard by now if he wasn’t. The same with the children. They’re all fine. – Molly quickly dressed and rushed off

to start breakfast. Cooking for more than a dozen people would keep her occupied, at least.

She bustled into her kitchen and stopped dead in her tracks. Her kitchen was cleaner than it had been in decades; it positively glowed.

“Morning, Mum.” An arm slid around her shoulders, and a large hand pressed a warm mug of tea – sweet with plenty of honey, just like she liked it – into her hand. Ron kissed her on the cheek. “Figured you might want some help with breakfast.”

She hugged her youngest son back, enjoying the rare display of affection and took a sip of tea, trying to re-gather her wits. “I certainly wouldn’t say no to a bit of help. I must say, it looks like someone has already made a good start, though!”

Ron blushed and looked down at his feet. “Just thought I’d do something nice...”

“You did very well, Ron. Very well indeed.” She hugged him again. “Thank you.”

He shrugged, and tried to hide his embarrassment. “It’s time I learned to cook anyway. Gonna have to feed myself someday, so I want to learn from the best.”

She took another sip of her tea and decided she would puzzle out Ron’s strange behavior some other time; first thing in the morning was no time to be looking a gift horse in the mouth. “Well, all right then. We’ll need to put tea and coffee on for the Order...” she trailed off as she saw coffee and teapots already set up with mugs, milk, sugar and cream set out.

Ron looked sheepish.

Molly hugged her son a third time, and set about teaching him how to cook breakfast. And Ron set about surprising his mother by being a patient and attentive pupil.

She taught him just like her mother had taught her; he did the work while she told him what to do. He stayed focused, asked questions in all the right places, and – most remarkably – stayed calm even when she lost patience with or was short with him.

Nor did her matronly eye miss Ginny sitting at the table, sipping a cup of tea Ron kept full, watching with narrowed eyes.

If Ginny doesn't know what's going on with him either...

Molly tried not to worry. It was simply Ron finally growing up.

By the time the rest of the Weasleys and members of the Order woke up, Apparated or Flooed in, Ron had breakfast cooked and politely served it.

With surprising subtlety and sensitivity, Ron seated Fleur and Charlie at the opposite end of the table from Tonks and Bill, though he couldn't do anything to shield Ginny from the stares.

Molly watched as most every member of the Order spent more than half their breakfast staring at her daughter; only Bill and Tonks spared Ginny.

I don't have to be Dumbledore to know something is going on here...I had best learn why they're singling my daughter out, and I'd best learn soon!

Molly's eyes were on Charlie – though he was too busy watching his younger sister to notice his mother's scrutiny.

Finally, Ginny couldn't take it anymore. She slammed her silverware down on the table and stood up. "Since it's rude for me to distract people from their meal, I suppose I should leave!"

Ron watched her rush out of the kitchen, where he was finishing frying the last of the bacon. "Mum?"

Molly took over for Ron as he followed his sister. She cooked in silence for less than a minute before she spun towards the table, seething with rage.

"I hope you're proud of yourselves! Especially you, Charlie Weasley! You have managed to make my daughter feel unwelcome at my kitchen table! I know good and well when you people are playing with your secrets and I fully expect to be informed when those secrets concern one of my children!"

Bill and Tonks stared at her blankly, but everyone else at the table winced.

"I don't expect you'd approve, Mum." Charlie answered. "You weren't there for the last part of the last Order meeting." He spoke slowly, as if each word were having for force itself out of him. "Dumbledore told us some things we needed to know. About Ginny's first year at Hogwarts." He paused, and gripped Fleur's hand under the table. "He told us, and gave us each things we needed to do."

"And just why did Professor Dumbledore feel the need to tell you about that?" Molly ignored the smell of burning bacon coming from behind her.

Kingsley Shacklebolt answered: "Because we have no way of knowing if Voldemort still has any kind of hold on her."

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Ron was torn between following his sister and venting a good bit of his anger at the Order.

What are they on about, staring at her like that!

Whatever it was, Ron would put down more money than he'd ever had that it had something to do with Harry, or Voldemort – or both.

Ron took his time following her. He knew she'd need a minute to pull herself together; and besides, he knew where she was going. Only a

Weasley would think to look there. He grabbed a box of tissues on his way out the back door.

Ron headed straight for the back of the Weasley's property (which was much larger than it looked on a map), heading past the garage where Arthur Weasley had kept his flying Ford Anglia and still kept his growing collection of both normal and ensorcelled Muggle artifacts. He trudged through waist-high weeds, wincing at the thought of Ginny running through the overgrowth barefoot.

Barely noticeable under a heavy growth of vines and other creepers, there was a small squat building of wood and stone. Its few windows were boarded up, and now served its original purpose – a storage shed, though once it had been a proper workshop.

Ron found Ginny sitting on the old front step, hugging her knees to her chest. He sat down next to her and handed her the tissues.

Ginny wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "I am such a silly little girl."

Ron shrugged. "Probably. So?"

"Prat." She punched him in the arm. "You're supposed to make me feel better."

"Mum shoulda' come out here and let me yell at the Order, then."

"So what? Did you come out here to yell at me, then?" Ginny snapped.

"Nah." Ron leaned back against the workshop door. "I came out to make sure you were okay."

Ginny sniffled and shook her head. "Well, I'm not!"

"Yeah, even I can see that." Ron sighed. "But I can't say I know what to do to help."

Ginny eyed him coolly. "Do you really want to?"

"Yeah, I do." Ron nodded. "I may not always do good showing it, but I do care."

Ginny rested her chin on her knees. "I know why they're always staring at me."

"You do?" Ron asked, surprised.

"It should be obvious, even to you. They're scared of me. Because of what happened my first year." She'd tried to sound casual, but all she could manage was a strained whisper. "Sometimes, I'm afraid of it, too."

Ron suddenly felt chilled. "Because You-Know-Who might be able to...possess you? Or what?"

"They're afraid Tom can see into my mind. Maybe possess me again. Maybe trick me, like he did Harry."

He shook his head. "I don't understand. Wasn't the You-Know-Who that possessed you just a memory in a diary?"

"Yes. And no."

"That was about as clear as Hermione talking about Arithmancy."

"The diary was Tom's memory. Whatever happened to or with the diary, Tom remembers."

Ron shivered. "Yeah, but he was dead for awhile, wasn't he?"

Ginny stared at her brother. How could he be so daft? "No. How can you be friends with Harry Potter and not know this? He was just weakened. He was still alive. He was 'remembering' everything that happened in the Chamber as it was happening. I could feel him."

"What's a bloke supposed to think with everyone nattering on about You-Know-Who 'coming back to life'?" Ron grumbled. "Keep explaining. Eventually I'll get it, I promise."

Ginny resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at him. "Okay, yeah. So Harry and Dumbledore aren't tops on 'clear speaking.' But the bottom line is that I am connected to 'You-Know-Who'. The diary was just the way the connection was created. Harry and I have a connection because he saved my life. Harry and Tom are connected because of Tom."

Ron thought for a moment, his mind racing. "So that means You-Know-Who still potentially has access to you. Whatever you learn from the Order, You-Know-Who might know."

Ginny nodded morosely. "So they all stare at me as if I'm a walking time-bomb. And for all I know, I might be."

Ron shrugged. "I don't think so, Gin. I think if You-Know-Who coulda' taken you over or whatnot, he would have done it last year when he was trying to screw with Harry. Have you tell him something or point him in the right direction. He didn't."

Ginny didn't look convinced. "Then I had to go off and flaunt that I'm writing to Harry."

"So? At least one of us should. Why would they be worried about you writing Harry?"

"Why were you?" Ginny crossed her arms and glared at Ron.

Ron sighed. "Because I'm worried about my friend, and wish he would talk to me. I know he can't, really. I can't understand what he's been through, not really. You can, I suppose. Leastwise, better than me. And if he's talking to you, then he's not cutting everyone off. It surprised me, is all."

Ginny nodded. "As soon as they found out I was, they were even worse about it all!"

Ron shrugged again. "Maybe it's the Chamber again. Dumbledore told Harry that saving a witch or wizard's life created some kind of magical debt, or connection between them. Maybe that's what they're worried about."

Ginny cursed under her breath before asking: "Why would they worry about that? Or are people pissed just because Harry is finally talking to me?"

Ron shrugged. "Damned if I know, Gin. Thought you were over Harry, anyway. That's what Hermione said last year."

Ginny bit her lower lip and hid her face behind her hair. "I gave up on him. I never stopped liking him, okay?"

"Oh." Ron looked over at her. "What was that bit about Dean Thomas, then?"

Ginny snorted indelicately. "I was winding you up, Ronald, because you were being a prat about me dating anyone."

Ron shrugged again. "I was right about Michael Corner, wasn't I?"

"Maybe," Ginny grumbled, then sighed. "Am I going to lose every boy I like to Cho Chang?"

"I doubt it. She's gone after this year." Ron said. "I'm glad she and Harry are through, though. She's a decent Seeker and all that, but she doesn't make things easy on a bloke. Took Harry for a ride, and Hermione was no help at all, at least until Harry'd already done the wrong thing."

"If she were giving advice on girls out, she might have been nice enough to point him my direction." Ginny mumbled. "I don't get you two, the way you treat him, I mean."

It was Ron's turn to glare at Ginny. "I'm daft, remember? Spell it out."

Ginny met Ron's gaze as evenly as she could, though she was fully aware she might have just stepped over an invisible line – a line she should have known was there. "You and Hermione...you're just so damn accepting of everything he goes through! Almost everyone is, but you two are the worst! Just because he suffers in silence doesn't mean someone shouldn't say something!"

"Yeah, it does." Ron's posture subtly shifted; he went from being a supportive brother to the distant and somewhat enigmatic companion of the Boy Who Lived, and Ginny was suddenly very aware there was a difference, even if Ron wasn't. "Harry is a very private person, Gin. Having his private life plastered all over the place is the hardest thing he's ever faced, You-Know-Who included. He doesn't want attention drawn to what he's been through, what he still has to go through."

Ron's eyes were like a pair of blue flames. "It's the hardest thing he asks of his friends, to just let things go. But he won't stand for any of it if we press too far. Hermione and I, we can do more just being there for him, at his side and at his back, doing what we can to make sure he lives to see another day. He doesn't want more than that and sometimes it's hard enough to get him to accept even that much."

"Right. That's so bloody mature. Just hide from it all." Ginny leaned back. "Great way to deal with things."

"Shove it, Gin," Ron snapped. Ginny sat up, her eyes blazing, but he cut her off. "Harry can't deal. No one leaves him alone long to let him, so he does the best thing he can do – he keeps moving forward, waiting for the day he's allowed to sit down and work through it all."

"So he doesn't let his friends help?" Ginny's eyes were twinkling with an odd glint - an expression that when seen on the twins was usually followed by an explosion. "What about someone closer than a friend?"

"Like a girlfriend?" Ron scoffed. "He barely knew what to do with Cho Chang and there were times she practically led him by the nose. For anyone to get that close...I don't know that anyone can, Gin. Not anymore."

Not after Sirius.

Ginny's lips thinned, but she nodded.

Ron hated awkward silences and he really didn't have anything else to say. As it stood, he wasn't sure he hadn't said too much.

Standing, he brushed dirt and leaves off his pants and spent a long moment looking at his grandfather's old workshop. He thought about the damaged cabinets, the stained counters, the lopsided drawers – and the thousand and one other things that needed fixing.

I wonder if anything Grandad Charlie taught me stuck?

Ginny was standing behind him. “Ron?”

Why not try? If I screw it up, will it really be all that different from anything else I do?

But there was no way he was going to pull this off alone.

“Hey, Gin?”

“Yeah?”

“Go get dressed. In your work clothes. We're gonna make ourselves useful and keep you away from the Order.”

- 0 -

Ginny ran upstairs to get dressed.

Leave it to Ron to get responsible in an impossible way.

She changed into her work clothes, tied her hair back (which took a bit of time, because it was down to her waist these days), threw on her boots, and dashed back out, almost running into Charlie. He was standing in her doorway, dressed in casual robes. Fleur was standing next to him, clutching his hand. She stared at Ginny with an expression halfway between fear and awe.

They can't be that worried about me being a conduit to Tom, can they?

She frowned at Fleur's hand in Charlie's – she didn't really know what happened, but she hadn't forgiven Charlie for stealing Fleur from Bill

– her eldest brother hadn't been around much since. Ginny had watched her brothers her entire life; she knew whatever it was that happened had hurt Bill deeper than she'd ever seen him hurt before.

"Hey, Gin, can we talk?" Charlie asked, using what Ginny had long ago dubbed his 'smooth' voice – when he wanted something or Mum had made him apologize.

Great. So he's going to apologize for staring at me at breakfast. What does that fix?

She fixed him with an annoyed glower. "I don't suppose I have a choice, seeing as how you're between me and where I'm going."

Charlie grinned wryly and shrugged. "It's nothing big. I just wanted to ask you about the letters you and Harry have been writing."

Ginny took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, trying very hard to ignore the anger creeping up in her gut. Time to nip this in the bud.

"That's too bad, isn't?" Ginny smiled sweetly. "Because I don't want to talk about them. Pardon me, Ron needs my help." She tried to push past Charlie, but he gently pushed her back with his free hand.

"I'm very sorry, Ginny, but what you want doesn't come into this." Charlie spoke softly, sounding resigned and serious at the same time. "You are going to discuss the letters."

Ginny blew an errant lock of hair out from in front of her eyes. "No. I won't. Now please move."

"S'il vous plaît, Jenae," Fleur whispered. "You flirt with danger! Zere is more at stake here zan your privacy. We do not do zis lightly, I promise!"

"Don't patronize me." Ginny narrowed her eyes. "The answer is no."

Charlie sighed and drew his wand. "I tried to do this the easy way. Accio letters!"

The worn leather scribe holding Harry's letters flew across the room. It had been their mother's; Ginny had appropriated it as a child to hide her first 'diary' – pieces of paper with doodles and notes and sketches.

Charlie lunged for it, trying to grab it before Ginny.

Ginny was faster. Months of training with the DA and as the Gryffindor Seeker had honed her reflexes to an edge Charlie hadn't anticipated. She grabbed it out of the air and tucked it under her arm.

Charlie took a step forward.

Ginny took a single step to the side and pointed her wand at her brother's face. Her eyes were cold.

"Damn it, Ginny!" Charlie growled. "This is more important than some schoolgirl crush or Harry's privacy. What you're doing could be endangering his life!"

"It's not," Ginny answered with unshakable certainty. She wasn't sure how she knew, but she felt all the way to the soles of her feet that the letters – and what was in them – were no danger to Harry. "And if you try that again, Charlie, I will defend his privacy to the best of my ability."

Charlie met her eyes and saw something sad there. But he also saw that she would and could do what she claimed. She would fight him for the letters.

"Ginny, please...!" He was willing to plead.

Ginny would hear nothing of it. She ducked around him and Fleur with the grace and agility of a dancer. "If you're so interested, write him yourself."

- 0 -

Ginny ran down the stairs and slipped outside through a rarely used side-door. She kept close to the side of the house and garage as long

as she could, using every skill and trick she'd learned avoiding a house full of people to stay unseen.

The Order didn't want to take away her contact with Harry. They wanted to use it to spy on him.

They wanted to control him. Her. Both of them.

Why else would Charlie want the letters? Why else would this 'connection' between us be so important?

She sprinted through the field between the garage and the workshop, grateful the shop's doors faced away from the house – they couldn't see her hide the scrip if she needed to.

Or so she thought. She was dismayed to see that Ron had cleared the brush and mowed down the grass in a wide swath around the front of the shed.

"Hey Ginny." Ron waved in greeting before going back to standing at the front of the shop with the door thrown wide, frowning at the sheer amount of junk that had accumulated over the past five years. "Ugh. Can you believe I let Mum and Dad do this to the place?"

Ginny paused to catch her breath, looking at Ron. His work-gloved hands were curled into fists resting on his hips and he was staring at the cluttered workshop with a pained – and somewhat proprietary – expression.

I can't imagine what this must be like for him. Ron and Grandad Charlie had been close; Ron had never really recovered from the shock of coming home after his first year of Hogwarts to find the workshop closed up and his grandfather gone.

He let his arms drop to his side and turned around to look at her, his expression immediately changing. "Hey, what happened? You okay?"

Ginny couldn't help but smile. This was the big brother she remembered from before Hogwarts – her partner in crime, her best

friend, and her staunch protector. I hate to admit it, but I've kinda missed the protector part.

"Charlie – the Order – tried to take Harry's letters."

Normally considered one of the densest and daftest blokes on the block, when Ron actually had all the information laid out to him, he was able to figure things out frighteningly quick.

"Charlie tried to take Harry's letters for the Order?" Torn between disbelief and anger, Ron shook his head. He pointed at the scrip. "That them?"

Ginny nodded nervously, clutching the leather pouch. "Yeah."

Ron blew out an explosive breath. "Bloody...I'm not gonna take 'em or read 'em, Gin. I got more respect for you and Harry than that."

Blushing, Ginny nodded. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm just..."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "It's all right. Your brother just tried to..." What had Charlie been doing, trying to take away the letters? "We'll just have to find some way to hide them. If I remember, Grandpa Charlie had a kind of chest..."

Ginny smiled wanly. "Guess that means we gotta get to work, then?"

Ron shrugged. "I do, anyway. You don't have to help if you don't want to – I guess I asked you 'cause I wanted the company. This really isn't your project."

Earlier that morning, Ginny might have snapped at him or gotten mad at him for trying to exclude her, but she realized that Ron really was trying to let her know he didn't expect or think she had to help him. That didn't mean she wouldn't.

"I want to help. Anyway," she walked into the shop and tucked the scrip up against the roof, where a pair of cross-braces made a convenient nook, "if I'm out here keeping you company, I'm going to get bored just sitting here."

Ron chuckled as he started hauling junk out into the grass.

“Besides,” Ginny tugged on her work gloves, “you’ll never get this all cleaned up on your own.”

- 0 -

It took Ron and Ginny all morning to clean up and set up the workshop, but when they were done, Ron was sure Grandad Charlie would have been proud.

At least, I’d like to think he would have been.

They’d discovered fairly quickly that what Arthur and Molly had stored there had been crammed around their Grandfather’s tools and equipment, making it easy to separate the junk from what belonged there. The junk got fed to Arthur’s large garage trash bin, long since ensorcelled to dispose of anything by transfiguring it into aluminum cans, which Molly Weasley would in turn sell to a Squib who worked for a Muggle junk dealer called a ‘recycler’.

They’d swept and dusted the workshop and let it air out while Ginny trimmed back the foliage and Ron mowed down the grass between the shop and the house.

All the while, Molly Weasley watched Ron like a hawk through windows from behind curtains, doing her best to make sure he didn’t see how worried she was. She had gone so far as to pull a chair up to the window with the best vantage point and put a pot of tea on a stool beside her.

She watched her son, hoping something he did would give her some clue to what was going through his mind – and his heart.

Molly might have been able to hide from Ron, but she couldn’t hide from Remus Lupin. He pulled a chair up beside her and watched with her in silence for almost half an hour, sipping his coffee.

Molly had noticed it was he'd only recently started drinking coffee, though she knew Sirius had been exceptionally fond of it.

"I don't think I've ever paid much attention to that shed before."

Molly didn't look away from the window. "Their grandfather's old workshop."

Remus raised an eyebrow at her, but like Molly, kept looking outside.

Molly laughed. "I forget, you're not a Weasley. Sometimes it feels you've become a part of the family."

Lupin smiled. "Thank you, Molly. But I'm nothing more than a guest passing through."

"Oh, nonsense, Remus Lupin! If you and Harry aren't family, then no one is!" She waved aside his protest, her tone of voice leaving no room for argument. "The workshop – it was Arthur's father's. Charles was still a fairly successful woodworker when he came to stay with us after the first war - his wife had been killed and he had nowhere else to go, and none of Arthur's siblings could take him in. Arthur helped renovate that old shed into a workshop so he'd have someplace to work."

Remus nodded, fiddling with the hem of his tattered jacket. "Where is he now?"

Molly sighed. "He retired to a small wizarding community in Wales after Ron started Hogwarts. I never should have let him and Arthur talk me around into letting him go..." She shook her head. "He and Ron were very close."

"I've never heard Ron mention him." Remus muttered.

"Ron never forgave him for moving away. Charles was really the only one Ron connected with, except Ginny. I was so busy with the older ones and Ginny, and Arthur was so busy with work...and Ron wanted his Grandfather's attention so very much."

Remus set his coffee cup on the windowsill and smiled. "I take it Charles was more than willing to take Ron under his wing?"

"Oh yes," Molly said. "Charles wanted to pass along his knowledge and skills, but none of his children had the knack of it, and most of the grandchildren weren't interested. But Ron loved playing 'Grandad's Apprentice'. He only really learned rudimentary skills, but what he did learn he was rather good at." Molly sighed. "He hasn't done a thing with it since Charles left. He felt so betrayed to come home from school and find Charles packed and months gone. He's never really recovered from the shock...he hasn't done a thing with what his grandfather taught him or left him."

"He seems to have changed his mind." Remus spoke quietly as he picked back up his coffee mug.

Molly sighed. "Remus, I would give almost anything to know what Hermione wrote to Ron."

Pausing mid-sip, Remus tilted his head. "Why?"

"I know my children, Remus Lupin. I know them better than they know themselves. Whatever Hermione said in that letter last night, it has hurt my son deeply enough for him to seek some kind of validation. Something to do to make him feel useful and needed. Whatever she said has done more to damage my son than all the 'adventures' he's had at Hogwarts."

The former professor nodded, thinking of his own conversation with Ron the night before. Heroes indeed.

Molly stood up, collecting her cup and teapot. "Well, at the very least, I can make sure they get a good lunch." She looked back over her shoulder. "And you too, Remus! I won't have you skipping meals while you're living under my roof!"

Lupin stood, cradling Sirius' old coffee mug, and followed Molly into the kitchen.

After lunch, the hard work began. Ron and Ginny set about sorting out Grandad Charlie's miscellaneous 'stuff'.

"I wonder why he left all his tools and plans and such behind when he took everything else with him." Ron picked up an old money pouch and dug around inside. "Huh. A knut."

"Good find," Ginny said, only slightly sarcastic. "He left them for you, oh bright one. So you could putter around out here."

"Nice of him," Ron growled, throwing the pouch and bronze coin back into the box. "That would have been more useful if I'd known. Or if he'd told me he was leaving!"

Ginny didn't know what to say, but Ron didn't give her a chance to say anything. He just turned away and dug around in the box, and pulled out a small metal chest. It looked like – and was about the size - of a small tool box, but was made of a gray-black metal Ginny had never seen before; there was a small golden key dangling from a string tied to the handle on top.

"Here. This should do for your letters." Ron held it out to her. "Gramps used this to store some of his specialty stuff – magical finishes, precious metals and stones. It's magic-proof, drop-proof, water-proof and even Fred and George couldn't get in it, not without the key."

Ginny took the handle and hefted it – it was heavier than it looked. The metal felt slick and cool. She slid the key into the lock, and it popped open, revealing that it was much larger on the outside than the inside.

"Perfect." Ginny quickly locked the leather scrip inside the chest. "Thank you, Ron."

He shrugged. "Glad I can help. Too many people in your and Harry's business anyway."

“And not in yours?” Ginny asked, pocketing the knut Ron had found earlier. She examined the money bag, and set it aside – the first item in their ‘keep’ pile.

“Why would anyone be interested in me?” Ron chuckled a handful of crumpled handkerchiefs on top of the money bag.

“I am,” Ginny said softly. She took a deep breath and decided to charge in where she should know not to go. “Ron, I’m sorry about Hermione.”

He shook his head. “Don’t be. I wish she hadn’t told you, but I’m glad I know where I stand now.”

“Do you?” Ginny pulled a short spear of cut and polished amethyst crystal from the box and held it up to the light.

“I’m her friend,” Ron said. “But not one she can trust with anything ‘deep’. I’ve got the emotional range of a teaspoon, remember?” He tried to sound light, but Ginny heard the bitterness in his voice.

“Ron...”

He shrugged and waved his hand at her. “Just leave it, Gin. Nothing I can do ‘til I can talk to her. She won’t read anything I write to her.”

Ginny nodded glumly. “It doesn’t make it fair, though.”

“Nothing’s fair, Gin. Nothing. All we can do is do what we can do. If that makes any sense.”

“Now who’s being deep?” Ginny shot back.

“Deep and nonsense are two different things. I’m good at the second. Now let’s get this done.”

- 0 -

Just like at breakfast, Ron helped fix dinner and then clean up after it. And to his immense satisfaction, most of the Order avoided looking at

Ginny while his own family watched him closely, each trying to figure out what he was up to.

After dinner, Ron and Ginny could be found next to the fire, pouring over a notebook full of plans and instructions Grandad Charlie had given Ron when he'd first started learning. The Weasley household was rife with speculation about what they planned – but after Ron and Molly stepped outside to talk for a few minutes, the rest of the Weasleys gave it up as impossible. Any secret Mum was in on stayed secret.

Ron got a perverse enjoyment out of listening to Order members whispering in corners, or conversations stopping when he passed by on his way to bed. And he was sure the Order noticed it was the first time he'd gone to bed before their nightly meeting.

I wonder if they'll waste their time trying to figure out what Gin and I are up to?

The thought amused him far more than it should have.

The next morning, Ron was up before the sun again and Ginny had joined him by the time he had the tea and coffee set out. Unlike Ron, Ginny wasn't dressed or ready for the day. She blearily accepted a mug of tea from her brother and slumped down in her customary chair at the table.

Ron was just getting ready to start breakfast when an owl flew through the open window, practically landing in Ginny's tea. She half-heartedly shooed it. "Ugh, go away. It's too early for mail."

"Or even to be awake?" Ron teased, trading the owl a bit of bacon for the letter. "Huh. Doesn't say who it's to..."

"Leave it for Mum. It's probably Order business, anyway," Ginny muttered.

Ron shook his head. "Order stuff's always addressed to someone and charmed. Besides, this looks Ministry parchment. Bet it's from Dad." He unfolded the letter. "Bloody hell, it's from Percy!"

Ginny blinked and stood up, reading over her brother's shoulder.
"From
Percy? Is the prat finally gonna apologize?"

"No," Ron whispered hoarsely as he read. "No, I don't think so."

Ginny swallowed hard. "It's no wonder Charlie wanted to read the letters."

"Yeah...but was that because of the Order, or because of this?" Ron muttered. "Or both?"

Ginny hugged herself. "How could they do this to him?"

Ron shrugged again. "Same way everyone else does, Gin. They don't give a damn about Harry, just about the Boy Who Lived." He put the parchment on the table. "I have an idea of how to find out what's going on. You up for it?"

His sister nodded, setting her shoulders. "What did you have in mind?"

Ron walked into the kitchen and started fixing breakfast. "You still have Hedwig? I think its time we had a chat with our brothers."

End Chapter

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Weasley Woes

Charlie was the last to arrive.

The rest of the Weasley children (except Percy, though he had been invited) had already gathered in their customary spot by the watering hole at the back of their property. They were sitting on a pair of logs set on opposite sides of an ancient firepit. Bill and Ginny sat on one side, the twins on the other. Ron was pacing back and forth between the logs, his back to Charlie, a piece of parchment clenched in his hands.

The sun was setting, haloing all of them in a descant of warm colors, their hair seeming to catch fire from the sun, making it seem like a conclave of fire-elementals.

Ron stopped pacing, turned around and glared at Charlie. His face turned red in the surest sign of a Weasley in danger of losing their temper. "I want to know why, Charlie."

"Why what, little brother?" Charlie asked mildly.

"How could you do this to him?" Ron practically snarled as he thrust the parchment at Charlie.

Charlie unfolded the letter and started reading.

At first, there was silence while Charlie read. No one could quite figure out what Ron was talking about. The twins looked at each other, then at Ginny's stricken expression, and then at Bill glaring at Charlie.

"It's about Harry, isn't it?" Fred asked.

"Only reasonable answer, really." George stated flatly.

Ginny nodded at them both. Hedwig flapped down from a high branch to land next to Ginny at the mention of her master.

"Yeah," Ron seemed to deflate, his anger rushing out of him. He sat down next to his sister. "Yeah, it's Harry."

Charlie waved them silent. "When did you start going through my mail, Ron?"

"When did you get the right to go through Ginny's, Charlie?" Ron shot back. "I'm still waiting for an explanation."

"So are we," Fred added. "We almost didn't come."

"Figured ickle Ronniekins was just trying to find out about Order business." George shook his head.

"Can't have that, can we?"

"Not a bit. But we came anyway, 'cause we heard Ron was making dinner."

"Figured we could bribe him to slip Snape a little something special."

"Brilliant plan, thought us." George sighed.

"But now we find out Charlie's done something to Harry." Both twins were looking at Charlie now. The hard expressions on their faces seemed out of place.

"Can't be order business, or we'd know about it, seeing as how we're in the order."

Charlie looked to Bill, who just shook his head. "I can't help you, even if I wanted to. You over-stepped yourself."

Charlie looked around at his brothers and sister, and in that moment very much understood how Percy must have felt when the entire family had arrayed against him because he held and acted on beliefs diametrically opposed to the rest. He tried to find the words, to find a way to explain, but he had never been good with people. He was good at flying, good at handling dragons and stalking through the Forbidden Forest. He left dealing with people to Bill and the twins.

"I did," he spoke calmly, "the only thing I knew to do under the circumstances. And I will not explain anything more to you, because it infringes on Order business."

Ginny gaped at Charlie in disbelief. "You betrayed Harry to the Ministry. You put him completely in their hands. He's saved my life at least once...and he's spent his entire life...and you just...gave him away? Just like that?"

Ginny wasn't sure why she was crying; she wasn't sure if the tears were for her, for Harry, or for what she had hoped might be between them – friendship or otherwise. He had written her a letter. He had wanted to get to know her. He had apologized to her. He had always seemed at least a little happy at the Burrow, or with the Weasleys. He'd lost Sirius...now he was losing more. He was losing his entire world.

It struck her that she was crying because of what she'd seen in her dream. And none of them would believe her, except maybe Ron. She knew a fraction of what Harry was enduring because of what Charlie had done.

Earlier, when Charlie had demanded to see the letters, she had known the letters didn't pose a danger to Harry.

Now, she was positive what Charlie had done did threaten Harry, maybe as much as Voldemort himself.

"Yes. Just like that," Charlie said.

"Wait." The twins spoke as one.

"We don't know what's up," Fred began.

"So is anyone going to explain?" George finished.

"Not in front of them," Charlie said, pointing to Ron and Ginny. "This is Order business!"

The silence drug on until Bill spoke. His voice was soft, but deep and held an indefinable air of menace.

“Order business, Charlie?” Bill seemed amused. “The Order agreed the Ministry needed to know some things. This,” He held up the tattered parchment, “has gone well above and beyond what was agreed to. Either time.”

Charlie turned to look at Bill. “Yes. I know. But I think it was necessary. You know why.”

“I still disagree.”

“What’s done is done, Bill. You can’t undo it.” Charlie was almost whispering now.

“Seriously,” George said, a note of frustration in his almost-cheerful voice, “if someone doesn’t start explaining, you’re all going to end up with new body parts.”

Bill sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Right. But this goes no further than this meeting.”

“You can’t do this, Bill,” Charlie warned.

“I can, and I will. Percy was dumb enough to send an unaddressed letter and you were dumb enough to past what the Order agreed to. If I don’t explain something, those four,” he gestured to Ron, Ginny and twins, “are loyal enough to Harry to find out on their own, and damn the consequences.”

“Too right.” The twins nodded in unison. Ginny wiped her eyes.

Charlie was silent for a long moment, then sighed and sat down. “After the Department of Mysteries, the Order decided to tell the Ministry, via Percy, information regarding Harry and You-Know-Who. Mostly, proof You-Know-Who was after him. We wanted the Ministry on our side, helping to protect Harry.”

Ron pointed to the parchment. "It doesn't explain that." He looked to the twins. "That," his finger was still pointing at the parchment, "is an update from Percy to Charlie about Harry. Fudge sent Umbridge to talk to the Dursleys and now Harry is completely cut off from the wizarding world. Percy thanks Charlie for making sure no one is in contact with Harry."

Everyone's eyes flicked to Ginny. From Percy's note, it was obvious she and Harry were somehow keeping their correspondence secret.

"Umbridge." Again, the twins spoke as one, a deep hatred in their mingled voices.

Bill looked startled. "What about her? I mean, aside from her taking over Hogwarts and getting Dumbledore sacked."

Ginny answered softly. "She tortured Harry with a blood quill. A few other students, too, but mostly Harry. She made him write 'I must not tell lies' over and over. Enough to make it permanent. She used Veritaserum on him. She was going to use the Cruciatus Curse on him. She was the one who sent the Dementors to Little Whinging a year ago." She looked up at Charlie. "That is who Percy and Fudge are trusting Harry's safety to. Charlie, please. What else did you tell them?"

"I think I know." Bill looked at Charlie. "Even after we agreed to help you. Even after we trusted you. You told them about the connection between Harry and You-Know-Who, didn't you?"

Charlie said nothing; he didn't even move.

"Why?" Ginny asked softly. "Why would you betray him to the Ministry like that?"

"Because there are some things greater than you or me or even Harry. Things that need to be preserved as much as You-Know-Who needs to be destroyed."

Ginny stared at Charlie as if she had never met him. "Greater things? Like what?"

“Harry is only one person. He’s done great things and doesn’t deserve most of what happens to him, but he is not more important than defeating You-Know-Who. Which could be jeopardized by him seeing what Harry knows or by fooling him again.”

Fred and George looked at each other. “Are you saying Harry is expendable?”

“I am trying to tell you isolating Harry from the Order and what the Order is doing is more important than any one person. Right now, Harry Potter and what he knows could be a danger to us.”

“Why is Harry expendable, Charlie? Do we even know what the Prophecy was about?” Ginny spat the words at her brother. “Do you have any idea why Tom wants to kill Harry? I should think if Tom wants Harry dead, then protecting him – which turning him over to the Ministry isn’t – should be a number one priority for the bloody Order!”

Charlie sighed and gave Ginny a patronizing look. “All right, little sister. You might have a point. However, your judgment where Harry Potter is concerned is very suspect!”

“Why is that?” Ron drawled. “I happen to agree with her.”

Standing, Charlie let out a slow breath. “He saved your life, Ginny. Remember? You’re magically bound to him. Not to mention your little crush.”

Fred and George both stood at that, but were stopped by a look from Bill. This was her fight. If she couldn’t win it on her own, no one would ever trust her where Harry was concerned.

“Oh, really?” Ginny asked softly. “He sent Hedwig to stay here this summer, you know.”

Ron gave Hedwig a glance. “I don’t think he’d have sent her away unless he thought she was in danger. I mean, have you seen the way he treats her? If Harry thought Hedwig was in danger then he

probably is too! I thought the bloody Order was keeping an eye on him!”

“We are,” Bill said. “As best we can. Which isn’t as well as we’d like. Fudge gave Dumbledore an ultimatum at the beginning of the summer. Either Dumbledore’s people leave Harry Potter by this summer, or he would be made a Ward of the State and put into a residential facility for troubled orphans. Which,” he added with a dark look for Charlie, “makes a lot more sense than it used to.”

Ginny flinched at the idea of Harry in an orphanage, but a quiet part of her whispered he might be better off there than at the Dursley’s.

“You knew this was going on and didn’t tell us?” Ron asked Bill.

“Yes,” Bill said. “Because Dumbledore ordered me not to. There’s no point in hiding it now, because you found out most of it.”

“Look, if he got sent to an orphanage, he’d be outside Dumbledore’s protections,” Charlie said. “Leaving him open to You-Know-Who’s attacks. Or worse, Fudge would put Harry under such restrictive security we’d never see him, maybe even under Umbridge’s control. He’d be a Ministry prisoner in all but name. At least this way, he’s as safe as we can make him.”

Ron shook his head. “If Fudge tried it, we’d stop him.”

“Who, little brother? You?” Charlie asked, a bit patronizingly. “Or maybe Ginny?”

“You don’t know what fate you’re tempting, Charlie...” Ron warned, with a bit of a growl in his voice. “You don’t know half of what we’ve done or what we can do. Ginny’s one of the best of us.”

“As nice as it is to see you stick up for Ginny,” Charlie said, “I want to know who is ‘us’ and what makes you think you could take on the Ministry, Aurors and the Minister of Magic? Isn’t that a bit arrogant?”

“No.” Ron shook his head. “It’s not. The DA is about half the upper class of Hogwarts from three houses. We’d have Fred and George

and anyone from Gryffindor who ever knew Harry. We're not as good as Harry is, but Neville and Hermione and I, we could train 'em up a bit. Then there's Hagrid...and you don't want to know about the Creevy brothers."

Ginny nodded. "They'd go to hell and back for him. Trust me."

Charlie was taken aback. "All those people would fight for Harry?"

George cut in. "That's just those we know would do it, Azkaban or not."

Bill cut the conversation short. "That's all speculation. The best I can do is tell the Order what Charlie did and ask for an update on Harry, but I can't promise I'll get an answer. Most of the Order knows I side with Mum and want him away from the Dursleys, and Kingsley Shacklebolt is being a royal pain in the ass about it. The more I ask, the less they tell."

Ron stood and started pacing. "Bloody...we need someone to get on the inside...the Muggle inside, I mean, use a Muggle way of getting in contact with Harry...find out what's really going on, you know?"

Ginny half hid her face behind her hair. "Hermione. Have Hermione call him. On the fellytone, or whatever it is. Maybe she can talk to him."

Ron jerked to a stop. He didn't look up at anyone. "Someone else would have to write her. I can't."

"Oh?" Charlie looked at Ron. "And why's that?"

Ron turned away from the group and shoved his hands in his pockets. "She won't answer my letters right now. Hell, she won't even read 'em. Have Ginny write it. This is about Harry, not me."

He walked off towards his workshop.

Ginny's glare caught all of her brothers. "Leave Ron alone. I will Owl Hermione, and I will make sure she talks to Harry."

She jumped up to follow Ron, but changed her mind. He probably needs a bit by himself. And I need to think this Hermione thing through.

This was not going to be as easy as it sounded.

Hermione had written once that summer, when she'd send her letter to Ron. Her letter to Ginny had been short, and to the point – she wasn't going to talk to Ron about it. Not only that, but she would send his letters back, unread. And oh, would Ginny kindly mind keeping this all a secret? And try to keep everyone else from bothering her unless the situation was dire? Though, Hermione had given Ginny a way to get a short message to her quickly if things were dire.

Well, this is dire. Harry is in some serious danger. Not that he'd ever think we worry, or care. Not that he'd ever really notice any of us at all...

Grah! What was she thinking? I swore, I promised this was over. No more Harry-angst, Harry-dreams, or Harry-hopes. I'd given up on him.

All that last year, she'd tried. She really had. And in the end...there had been nothing. She had dated Michael Corner, but he'd used her to get Cho Chang after Harry's abortive attempt at a relationship.

Near the end of the year, despite what she'd told Ron, she and Dean Thomas had shared a few kisses – rather intense kisses, but they didn't know each other. She'd tried to start correspondence with him, but every time he wrote back, all he wanted was to talk about the next time they kissed.

It wasn't exactly what she was hoping for.

And what are you hoping for, Ginny? Harry Potter, the Boy Who is Blind?

Ginny winced, thinking of what Charlie had said about magical bonds...Could all of this be because I'm bound to him?

She didn't like the thought, so she pushed it aside.

- 0 -

It was well past midnight, and Ginny was getting worried. Had Hermione not gotten her message? Maybe the charm hadn't worked?

It seemed brilliant when she suggested it. Hermione had given Ginny a watch. All she had to do was set the time on hers and it would change on Hermione's, alerting the girl she wanted to talk. Hermione had said if Ginny used the watch, she would contact her on the Order's secure Floo.

Forcing herself not to pace back and forth, Ginny waited by the fire.

Maybe she can't use a long-distance Floo connection...I have no idea where in Bulgaria she is...

Ginny tightened her robe around herself, and stared at the flames, willing them to turn green and for the bushy-haired know-it-all to appear with the answer.

Five minutes of nothing.

Ginny yawned, her jaw cracking. Her stomach sank and her insides twisted.

I can't go to sleep until I tell Hermione what's going on. Life-debt bond or no, I know something is wrong with Harry. She grit her teeth and forced herself to stay awake. Hell, maybe what ever this connection is makes me better suited to figure out what's going on with him!

She had been getting strong feelings about Harry and if he was in danger. It made sense if she were connected to him, she might know something everyone else didn't!

More time ticked by, and the fire stayed warm and red.

She's not going to be here...and Harry's alone. She won't answer because of my stupid brother, and Harry's going through hell and

won't ask for help because he's blaming himself. It's not his bloody fault Sirius was a git and got himself killed!

Even as she thought it, Ginny was wracked by guilt. Sirius had come to protect Harry – protect all of them, really – and had gotten killed doing so.

Isn't this how he would have wanted to die? Fighting? Doing something, anything?

Ginny had gotten to know the moody Sirius Black last summer when her family had stayed at Number 12, Grimmauld Place. They had sat in silence, him not demanding, her not asking. They had talked about Harry – Sirius had been desperate to learn more about his Godson, and was stunned at the story of Ginny's first year.

"Killed a Basilisk, banished Voldemort, destroyed the diary, and saved the girl?" Sirius had laughed, shaking his head, dark hair flying across his face. "James would have been proud. Hell, any Marauder would!"

She rested her head against the mantle. This is all your fault, Tom Riddle. And someday...you'll pay for it.

She turned away from the fireplace with a sigh, ignoring the crackle and rush of the flames as a log rolled over.

"Ginny! Ginny, is that you?"

Spinning on one bare foot, Ginny saw Hermione's face in the fireplace.

"Sorry it took so long...it took forever to break away from Victor!"

The anguished look on Hermione's face was too much for Ginny. She actually giggled. "That bad?"

Hermione made a face. "Worse. I..." she seemed to have to force her words out. "I miss you guys. I even miss Ron. And I'm worried about Harry."

Ginny grinned weakly. She knew what Hermione and Ron felt for each other, but she also knew they were stubborn, prideful and blind.

Not like me. I know how I feel. It's always there, and it never goes away. And I don't even know if I want him to see it or not.

"That's what I'm calling you about." She rubbed her forehead. "You need to call him, on the phone-thingie. You need to find out what's going on with him."

Hermione gave Ginny her patented Look. The look that had made both Ron and Harry pause and reconsider what they were planning to do more than once.

"Ginny, you'd better tell me what's going on. Why is it so important that I need to call Harry?"

The redhead was silent for a long moment, trying to come to terms with what she was about to say.

"Charlie told the Ministry Tom can get into Harry's head. Now he's under watch by the Ministry."

"I'm not surprised," Hermione answered. "To be honest, I've expected something like this for awhile." Her expression was grim. "But I can't. Not with what I'm involved in out here. Besides, the Ministry won't like me contacting him. I'm sorry, Ginny."

"I thought Muggles made phone calls all the time!" Ginny was shocked Hermione had refused – she hadn't even thought of that as a possibility.

"Yes, we do," Hermione snapped. "But getting away from Victor and the Order long enough to call a friend long-distance with no privacy from some random place in Bulgaria just isn't possible!"

"You managed this fire-call, didn't you?" Ginny scowled at Hermione.

"I did." Hermione nodded. "But it's the middle of the night. I'm not calling the Dursleys in the middle of the night. Angering his relatives certainly won't help him!"

Ginny growled. "So you're just going to leave your 'best friend' to rot in some living hell when you could find out what's going on with a single call?"

Hermione's eye blazed with the righteous indignation for which she was so famous.

"Harry is my best friend, Ginny. I've known him for five years, and I know his moods. Even if there were something wrong – which I don't doubt there is, he just lost his godfather! – I know he wouldn't tell me. Not to mention the grief he'd give me over checking up on him if it got me in trouble. To say nothing of the trouble I could get him in!" She paused for breath. "If the Ministry is having him watched, they'll know I called, Ginny. Then what? Get us forbidden to talk to him? That is, if I even get past his relatives to talk to him!"

Ginny snorted disdainfully. "Fat lot you know, for such a supposedly smart witch. Harry will never deal with Sirius' death by hiding in some dark little pit in Little Whinging. He'll wallow. He'll close off. He'll be emotionally abused by those...those Muggles and he'll have no one, nothing to lean on, even a little – only this time the Ministry will be looking over his shoulder, too. Remember last summer? How he was when he finally got out of there? Yes, he just lost his godfather. Which is why he needs his friends right now!" The sheer amount of disgust Ginny managed to lace into her voice startled Hermione. "But by all means, don't let me disturb your little love nest. Go back to running away from Krum. I'm sure you'll have loads of fun."

Hermione glared hard at Ginny. "Just when did you become the expert on Harry Potter's guilt, Ginevra Weasley?"

Ginny swallowed a sudden lump that had formed in her throat.

This was Hermione, the girl who two years ago had excitedly confided in her, whispering and giggling over the mysterious and suddenly oh-so-desirable Victor Krum; she had sobbed on Ginny's

shoulder when Ron had hurt her – so many times neither girl could keep count – and who later had leaned on her when Harry was taking everything out on his friends. Ginny had sobbed on Hermione's shoulder and whispered her secret and undying obsession with one of her best friends.

But like everyone else, she didn't remember why Ginny might understand Harry.

Why doesn't anyone remember, except to tell me I was a fool?

Ginny swallowed the lump.

In the end, she was still Ron's kid sister. She knew she wouldn't be let inside the walls the three had built around themselves. And any time she got close to any of them, they'd just remind her of what she'd done her first year – while any other time, like now, it was conveniently forgotten.

But even if she weren't allowed in, she was still going to take care of them.

Someone had to.

Ginny's whisper was hoarse. "If you don't know, if you can't figure it out, then I'm not sure I want to tell you."

"Ginny..." Hermione might have reached up a hand, had the Floo connection allowed that.

Ginny turned away and threw a pinch of Floo powder over her shoulder, severing the connection.

"Whatever."

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Molly Weasley sat at her dinner table and waited. She knew someone would be coming to talk to her soon. They would try to talk her out of it or tell her why she was wrong.

Not this time. They're wrong.

She wondered about the Dursleys. How could they have raised him, and he turn out like he had?

I hate them. I've never really hated before...but I hate the Dursleys.

It was a painful, startling revelation. She didn't even hate Voldemort; Ginny had spent so many nights crying on her shoulder from the mere memories of the horrors he had inflicted upon her. And of the horrors inflicted on Tom Riddle.

Riddle had been far more protected, loved, sheltered than Harry – but Molly couldn't hate him. Worse: she pitied him, saw him as a lost cause. In that, at least, she and Albus Dumbledore saw eye-to-eye.

But she hated Vernon and Petunia Dursley. It was raw, red hot emotion. Every time she thought about them, her guts clenched and every maternal hormone, every maternal feeling, she had raged out of control.

It had nothing to do with them being Muggles. It had nothing to do with how they felt about Wizards. It had to do with what they had done to the small child who had been left on their doorstep.

Any child left on her doorstep would have been given a warm and loving home and grown into maturity emotionally and mentally whole.

Vernon and Petunia had spat on the chance they were offered. The chance to give their son a brother; the chance to do something purely and truly wonderful by giving Harry a home. Instead, they treated him as less than human.

In Molly's heart, two of her sons were alone right now. Percy had turned away from his blood for what he saw as a greater cause. At least Molly could take pride that Percy was willing to stand for what he believed in, even if it meant standing against his own family – Merlin knew she had done the same.

But Harry was locked away from her by the secrets of Albus Dumbledore. She knew there were still secrets Dumbledore had not told her, secrets that would make or break Harry Potter. The same secrets that had allowed the Ministry to come between Harry and the Order.

So, she had made a decision. To her, it was really the only option.

This was the last night.

This was her last night.

When the sun rose, Molly Weasley would no longer be a member of the Order of the Phoenix.

For a moment, she had a twinge of regret, but it vanished swiftly.

The Order is not as important as one child's soul. If I can save his soul, then I will...and the Order can burn.

Now, she waited for the Order's answer to her resignation.

Minutes passed, and all Molly heard was the ticking of the clock.

CRACK!

"Molly." The tall, thin woman pursed her lips, as if unsure what to say. Or if there were really words for her to say that would mean anything or make a difference.

"Minerva."

I don't want to fight with you, Minerva. But even as she thought it, Molly heard herself speaking.

"Come to tell me to keep what I know to myself and that you can't tell me any more than you can tell the children?"

Minerva McGonagall didn't flinch away from Molly's anger. She was far too stoic, too strong for that.

"I came to ask why."

At one point, the two women had been friends; before that, they had been teacher and student.

Now, Molly was looking at her as if she didn't know her.

Maybe I don't.

The red-headed woman shrugged. "Does it matter why, Minerva? You have the ability to be there with him. You could be there for him. At least let him know he is not alone. But you don't."

Minerva refused to look away. "This is what must be. Believe it or not, he is safer there than anywhere. He has faced worse, and lived."

Molly spoke softly. "And he is still a child. He is still fifteen years old. He has never been held. Never been told it's okay to cry. Never been told it's okay to hurt. And all of you...you act like he's a man. You force him to be a man, and don't give him a bit of slack when he can't live up to what you demand he try to be! You trap him between being a child and being a man, and you won't commit to either course."

McGonagall scowled. "That is a burden circumstances placed on him as much as any of us did. You-Know-Who is at least as responsible as the Order or his teachers, Molly. Not a one of us wanted him involved, but he gave us no choice!"

Molly huffed indignantly. "As if he had a choice? He is a child expected to be a legend. No one bothered to prepare him for what people would see when they looked at him. The savior of the Wizarding world, Minerva - we all think it, even if we don't say it."

Shaking her head, McGonagall sighed. "How could we prepare him, Molly? How could we help him?"

Molly rose from her chair, every inch a redheaded she-bear defending her cub. "You could have listened to him, trusted him. You ignored him when he came to you and told you about the

Philosopher's Stone. He faced You-Know-Who alone because no one would trust him, even though we credited him with saving us all. So of course he didn't even dream you would listen to him when he was hearing that damn basilisk – and my daughter paid the price! She didn't live, Minerva, she survived!”

Instead of being the bright red of a Weasley on a tirade, she was pale as a ghost, and so intense that Minerva felt trapped by her gaze, held in place by a force of personality no magic could overcome.

“She survived because he and my son were brave enough to do what grown wizards could have done if they had only given a child reason to trust them.”

She took a step forward.

“You hid his past from him, as if he doesn't have the right to know who he is and where he came from! Sirius Black broke free of Azkaban, and you turned around and expected him to understand and think about it like an adult! He nearly died, nearly had his soul sucked out by Dementors! And after, Harry saw clear to listen to a man our entire world turned their back on. A man we locked up without so much as a trial!”

Minerva opened her mouth to speak, but Molly cut her off. “Now Sirius is dead because of the choices you heaped on Harry without a whit of the knowledge or guidance he needed to make those decisions! Sirius and I were at odds, yes, but I could at least respect him because of his love for Harry. He wanted to help Harry be the man you and Dumbledore force him to be.”

“And what of you, Molly? Where have you been? Why haven't you tried to provide such guidance to him?” McGonagall was looking at her as if she were an errant schoolgirl caught cheating.

“Oh no you don't, Minerva McGonagall.” Molly shook her head. “Who stood by him during the Triwizard Tournament? I would have been there, but I wasn't supposed to interfere. I wasn't supposed to ‘mother him’ – weren't those the words you and Albus used in your letter telling me not to come until the very end?”

Minerva bowed her head. "Yes. Those were the words. Because if he came to depend on you, then how could he live at the Dursley's? Trust me, Molly, that is the last place we want him, but that is where he has to be!"

Molly shook her head. "If the Order considers Harry Potter's emotional and mental well-being a 'reasonable sacrifice' for his 'safety' from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, then I have no reason to be a member of your Order."

Minerva looked at Molly sadly. "That is very unfortunate for the Order."

"Yes," Molly said. "It is. Now get out of my kitchen."

CRACK!

McGonagall Apparated away and Molly sank back down at her table and buried her face in her hands.

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Morning came and the sun rose over the Burrow. Bill Weasley stood outside and held a steaming mug of hot chocolate, enjoying the warmth on his face.

There was a whisper of sound behind him; the curse-breaker didn't turn.

"Hello, Tonks."

He heard her snuffle, and he turned around to her, arms open. Every time she came back, it was like this.

Tonks leaned against him, drawing comfort from her friend. She'd been a Hogwarts with him and Charlie, but had only really gotten close to Bill, despite being three years younger.

Although I don't think she's ever forgiven me for not going into Auror training.

Bill had seen what the Ministry had done to his father. He had taken his skills elsewhere. Besides, he had his own dreams to fulfill.

"Shh." He ran his free hand through her multi-colored hair. "Bad night?"

Tonks nodded. "Bad."

He handed her the hot chocolate. "Drink up, and then hit the rack."

She nodded, and cradled the mug. Bill reached over to the patio table and grabbed the second mug he had waiting, and took a careful sip.

"You always keep it just warm enough, you know." Tonks stood next to him, their shoulders barely touching.

"I try." He stared at the sun, and smiled; he missed it while he was in England. It was usually so cloudy here. In the Sahara, it burned bright overhead, cleansing, pure heat blasting the desert. He took in a deep breath, remembering the scent of the sands.

"It gets worse every night."

Bill took her hand. "I know. How is he?"

"The same. Silent. Withdrawn. Bill, why the hell did Fudge do this? Do you know what's going to be left of his mind when he gets out of there?"

Neither one of them wanted to think about what Harry might be like when he finally escaped the Dursleys.

Finally, Tonks sighed.

"Minerva talked with your Mum."

He nodded. "I know. Mum told me when I put her to bed. I found her at the kitchen table, just staring at some letter."

"You got her to sleep?" the Auror asked, surprised, as she drained the rest of her mug.

"Slipped her a mickey in her hot chocolate. There'll be hell to pay this afternoon, but she needed the sleep."

Tonks looked mournfully at her empty mug. "Oh, damn. You're slick, Bill Weasley."

Bill grinned impishly as Tonks blinked, getting woozy. "Mum always said I had a way with the ladies."

End Chapter

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bulgaria

Hermione wasn't sure how long she sat there after the conversation with Ginny.

For the first time since coming to Bulgaria, she felt disconnected. For more than two weeks, she had felt like she was in the center of things; attending the Conference, negotiating for the Order, trying to figure out what she was doing with Victor Krum. Not only was she allowed to do magic, as Bulgaria had looser laws against underage witches and wizards, she was treated as an adult witch.

She was Minerva McGonagall's student, and many saw Hermione being chosen to accompany McGonagall to the conference as a proof that Hermione was McGonagall's protégé. She was included in discussions on magical theory and practice, and Hermione found that she was able to not only hold her own, but to contribute significantly. McGonagall fairly beamed with pride.

After the week with her family, Hermione had needed the encouragement. It was a balm on the raw emotional wounds and went a long way to helping her feel more like herself.

Stop being silly, Hermione Granger, she scolded herself. You knew this would be the price of being in the Order.

She heard a muted pop! outside the door, and poured a second cup of tea from the ever-full teapot that had come with the suite of rooms she and McGonagall shared.

The older woman walked in sat next to her student with a sigh, gratefully accepting the tea.

"How did your conversation with Molly go?" Hermione, like every member of the Order, had received the news the Weasley matriarch had resigned from, and she knew McGonagall had decided to go talk to her.

“Not well.” Minerva shook her head. “You were right. She’s leaving the Order because of what she believes is happening with – and to – Harry.”

Hermione grimaced. “My conversation with Ginny went much the same. She wants me to use Muggle methods to contact him and find out how he is. She wasn’t happy I refused.”

McGonagall’s mouth tightened into a thin line. “That fits with what I’ve been told. Severus apparently overheard Ron and Ginny talking earlier this summer. It seems she is dreaming about him.” McGonagall’s expression was pained. Whether it was because Ginny was dreaming of Harry or Snape eavesdropping, Hermione couldn’t tell. “Severus is convinced it has something to do with the connection between the Harry and Ginny.”

Hermione paused with her cup halfway to her lips. “Connection?”

McGonagall nodded. “I thought you knew. Their experience in the Chamber your second year caused Ginny to have a wizarding life-debt to Harry. Such life-debts are powerful ephemeral magic that we do not entirely understand.”

Finishing her sip of tea, Hermione didn’t look at her mentor. “What do we know about it?”

McGonagall shrugged. “It is a relatively simple theory infinitely complicated by application. Harry saved Ginny’s life at the risk of his own for no other reason than it was ‘the right thing to do’, and a magical connection was created between them. A debt. Miss Weasley is consequently more aware of Mr Potter’s existence and needs than she would otherwise be, and feels a compulsion to protect him, even to her own detriment.” Sighing, the old Professor shook her head. “It takes a very specific set of circumstances and intentions to create a life-debt. They are very rare and powerful phenomenon on their own, but combined with Ginny’s attraction to Harry and her own natural magical gifts, it seems the situation has become extraordinarily complicated.”

Hermione set her cup down, a sinking feeling clenching at her guts. "In other words, the connection is stronger and more influential than anyone expected it to be?"

"Essentially, yes," McGonagall answered with a nod.

"Minerva, is it possible that Professor Snape is right, and this is a manifestation of that connection? And if so – isn't it possible that she might know if Harry were in danger?"

McGonagall looked sharply at Hermione. "It is very possible. But even if he were in danger, we cannot remove him from the Dursleys' home. Whatever danger he is in there is far less than he would be away from his Aunt. It is also quite possible Miss Weasley is picking up on Harry's distress and needs stemming from the emotional turmoil of his godfather's death."

"Yes, I know she could be. And I know the blood protections are important. You've told me dozens of times this summer." Hermione sighed. "But I'm not sure we're not going about this all wrong. Why not put someone in there with him?"

"I don't know," Minerva admitted. "Only Albus understands the full implications of the situation, and he is not available to consult with at the moment." She set down her cup. "Hermione, promise me that you will not attempt to contact Harry Potter."

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed. You knew this battle was coming, too. So don't get mad at them, or yourself.

"Minerva, would you ask any other member of the Order that? Even the Weasleys, who have known Harry as long as I have?"

McGonagall pursed her lips. "No, I wouldn't."

"Then why ask me?"

"Because." McGonagall smiled wryly. "I am still used to thinking of you as my student."

"I still am," Hermione said. "But I am also a member of the Order. You and Dumbledore asked me to join, and against what might be my good sense, I did. Either you have faith in my judgment, or you don't."

"If I did not before, I do now." McGonagall stood. "You have more than proven yourself these past two weeks."

"Thank you," Hermione whispered. "After what I've done..."

"Yes." McGonagall sighed. "After what you have had to do...you deserve our trust." She gripped Hermione's shoulder. "And I am still sorry for what was asked of you. It could not have been easy, lying to your friends and to Victor Krum."

Hermione blinked away tears. "Thank you."

"I am still not sure it was the right course. That what we asked you was worth what we have received."

"It is," Hermione interrupted McGonagall. "This is a war. And in war there are sacrifices. This kind of negotiation is a battle in and of itself, and it is a sound strategy. It worked. Victor was more receptive because I was the one doing the talking, and the Bulgarians were more receptive because it was Victor who wanted to help us."

The aging Professor shook her head. "We should both get to bed, Hermione. I will see you in the morning."

Hermione nodded, but kept staring into the fire as McGonagall headed to her bedroom.

She asked me for that promise because she was afraid. They're afraid of me contacting Harry.

She shook her head at the thought. That wasn't right. They were afraid, but it had nothing to do with her contacting Harry.

They don't want Ginny to contact Harry.

Hermione poured herself another cup of tea. Why not? If they're 'linked' through this magical life-debt, why keep them apart?

It made very little sense on its face. Obviously, they knew something she didn't. But she couldn't shake the feeling that if Ginny thought there was something wrong with Harry, there might very well be. She acknowledged the possibility of grief over Sirius, but that didn't account for everything, or the Order's sudden desire to leave Harry with less contact than he'd had last summer.

And the results of last summer were bad.

Yet, there was a plausible explanation for why they wanted to keep Harry and Ginny apart. Flimsy, but plausible.

Voldemort has a connection with both Ginny and Harry. And Harry and Ginny's connection was created fighting and defeating Voldemort. Do they think the link between Harry and Ginny would make it easier for Voldemort to influence Harry? Or even Ginny?

Hermione didn't think she would get answers from the Order. Their business in Bulgaria was finished. They had what Dumbledore sent them for.

And I am no longer the same girl I was when I came here. She didn't like who she was becoming, or what she'd had to do.

In the end, it might make a difference in the war against Voldemort, and it would help protect the Order from the Ministry.

Hermione took a deep breath, trying to pull herself together. What Dumbledore had asked her to do was necessary. She had to believe that. If she didn't, it would mean she had hurt and abandoned her friends for nothing.

But she had served her purpose. The Order no longer needed Hermione Granger. Her opinions and ideas and theories would no longer be welcome – especially those about Harry Potter.

Even if I were going to, how would I get from here to Little Whinging?
Or even someplace I could call him from?

The Order wouldn't help her. She'd even put money down on the Order trying to stop her. She didn't know how to make a Portkey, let alone Apparate. Even with all of her knowledge of magic, she didn't know how to get from Bulgaria to Britain.

Magic.

Hermione smiled as a plan began to take shape, but with her plan came more doubts.

What am I doing? Or, rather, why am I doing it?

Always before, it seemed like Dumbledore had his reasons for what he did. Or did he?

Dumbledore has a plan. I know that much because of what I learned when I joined the Order. But what about the past five years?

First year, Dumbledore's plan to protect the Philosopher's Stone had literally come within minutes of losing it to Voldemort. Second year, Harry had saved Ginny with, again, only minutes to spare. Third year, she, Harry and Ron had almost died again – in some ways, because of Dumbledore's plan to protect Harry. Their fourth year seemed random - not even Dumbledore could have expected Harry would have been forced to compete in the Triwizard Tournament.

Why hold such a dangerous event? Even with the precautions they took, why hold it?

Last year had been the worst. Harry had been an emotional wreck, barely able to hold himself together. And until the very end, when they were fighting for their lives in the Department of Mysteries, Dumbledore had barely raised a hand to help him. Or any of them.

There are pieces to this puzzle I'm missing. There has to be a unifying factor to tie everything together.

There was one, but she didn't like it. Each year, it had been harder to survive, and each year, more and more of what made them able to fight seemed to slip away.

In every case, if we had been allowed to act as we saw fit – if we had been trusted, given help instead of cryptic warnings to stay out of things – we might have...

She paused. Might have what? Won sooner? Prevented the inevitable confrontations?

Why did Dumbledore believe us third year? There was no proof

Hermione rubbed her temples. She needed more information. I don't have it, so I have to work with what I have.

It was hard to accept that, because her conclusion was as preposterous as any of Ron's off-the-cuff theories.

How many times have we been right, even when told we were wrong? Even when presented with proof we were wrong?

She poured herself another cup of tea. Why are we always right? What do we know the adults don't?

This time, her conclusion was one that would have driven Snape or Draco Malfoy insane.

No matter what, our focus is on Harry James Potter. Rarely was the focus of the trio on Ron or herself. She had never resented it. She didn't like the limelight, but she did like being a 'supporter' behind the scenes. It sometimes created friction between Ron and Harry, but in the end they always worked it out – and the focus stayed on Harry.

Everything always comes back to Harry. She set the teacup down and stood up to pace. Last year, everything had led up to finding and protecting a Prophecy she had never heard. That would make sense. If Harry is the focal point for a Prophecy...

Hermione looked like she'd bit into something sour. Divination again. Foretelling the future.

"Always in motion, the future is," she muttered to herself. It was a line from one of her father's favorite movies. The future is always changing, with each action each person takes. Right. I agree with that. It's part of why I think Divination is a crock.

She gathered up the tea things and put them in the kitchen. So, why would Prophecies even work? Obviously, they're real.

Of course. Just because the future was always changing didn't mean that there couldn't be a condition set on a set of probable future events. Some circumstance or element that was necessary for a certain set of events to take place in a certain way.

Right. Okay. That's logical. Does that mean Harry is a conditional element?

It made a good hypothesis to start from, considering the plethora of empirical evidence supporting it. But a conditional element of what? Voldemort's defeat? It was a frightening thought, but it was the only answer that fit the facts.

It would explain why Voldemort is so intent on Harry. But Dumbledore's actions – or lack thereof – didn't make any more sense in light of it. Unless he doesn't know?

There was another possibility, one that chilled her to the core. Or he's misunderstood, misinterpreted somehow. Or someone else has.

Either way, it meant Harry was in the center of things. Ignoring the center of a hurricane or a fire makes it impossible to predict or understand what it might do next.

Hermione distantly realized she had made it back to her bedroom and had started packing.

But that doesn't mean much...unless you take into account that Harry is being ignored, or at least set aside. He's trapped in a prison each summer, and each summer it gets worse and worse.

What would happen if the conditional element of a future event were removed? Or kept from interacting with the event he was a condition of?

It wouldn't happen according to the Prophecy, because the conditions of the outcome would be violated.

She pulled out a piece of parchment, one corner of her mind composing a note for Professor McGonagall.

The logical event for Harry to be the conditional element of is the defeat of Voldemort. If we remove him as the conditional element, then Voldemort has a greater probability of winning.

The purpose of the Order of the Phoenix was to defeat Voldemort. If I've been right before when others have been wrong, then there's a good chance I'm right now and I need to go to Harry.

Hermione finished the note and left it on her door for McGonagall to find. Then she paused.

Dumbledore has to know. He said he was going to out of touch. He might not know what's going on.

She grabbed another piece of parchment, re-dipped the quill, and wrote frantically for almost an hour. She was careful what she told him, because she wasn't sure of most of her own theories, but she concentrated on what she thought was happening between Harry and Ginny.

If Ginny is bound to Harry through a wizarding life-debt, and if, as Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape believe, the bond between them is stronger than expected (which I have my own theories on, of course), then it is possible Ginny is picking up on some danger or distress on Harry's part.

I understand the reasons why no one should contact him. I understand Ginny could be picking up on his grief over Sirius or even his anger at Umbridge and the Dursleys, but if that were the case, wouldn't she have picked up stronger impressions during the school year or even right after?

Regardless, I think there is enough reason for someone to check on Harry. As our business in Bulgaria is satisfactorily concluded, I am going to Little Whinging. I know the possible consequences, which is why I am acting in defiance of direct instructions. You and everyone else will have deniability in that you told me not to go and even tried to stop me.

Folding up her letter, Hermione sealed it with a quick set of charms and pulled out the small red leather bag she'd been given when she joined the Order. It was easy enough to find the token she was looking for and pulled out a long, thin feather. It was a beautiful shade of red and seemed dusted with gold.

Fawkes' tail feather.

Though Professor Dumbledore felt he had to be out of touch while he did whatever it was he was doing, he still made sure the Order had a way to contact him in an emergency. There was only one feather, but any member of the Order could reach it through their bag.

I am going to get into so much trouble for this.

Hermione touched her wand to the feather and there was a flash of light as it caught fire. She stood and watched it burn. It was utterly consumed by the fire. There weren't even ashes.

And as soon as the feather ceased to exist, there was a flash of light and a burst of song that warmed her all over, from the inside out. It was a clarion call of triumph and victory and light.

He stood before her, magnificent and regal in bright red and glittering gold. Larger than almost any bird she'd seen, Fawkes stared her in the eye, crooning softly. Tentatively, Hermione reached out a hand and caressed the phoenix.

“Fawkes...”

She knew who he was, but she'd never seen him before. Harry had told her about him, but seeing him was something entirely different.

“I need you to take a note to Professor Dumbledore. I think Harry is in trouble...I'm going to him. To check on him, and if I need to, get him out of there. I don't know if I'm doing the right thing, but I know Harry would do the same for me.”

Even as she said it, she realized the real reason she was going. If there was even a chance Harry needed her, she needed to be there for him. He would have moved heaven and earth to get to her if there was even a hint she was in danger.

How could she do less for him?

Fawkes nuzzled her and trilled a whisper of song that seemed to cement her determination. How could she have even thought about not going? Even Fawkes thought she was right.

The phoenix took the letter in his beak and vanished in a flash of fire.

Hermione didn't wait for an answer. She needed to get moving. It didn't take her long to collect the rest of what she needed, and she made her way silently through the halls of Durmstrang. The school was both everything Hermione had expected and nothing like what Hermione had expected.

It was a dark and imposing citadel, with none of the open, airy courtyards she was so fond of at Hogwarts. Everything was dark and somewhat gloomy; the entire place was drafty, damp, and moldy. But there was something very elegant about it. There were no suits of armor, but there were hundreds of tapestries and murals decorating the walls. Instead of torches and candles and sunlight, gaslights provided eerie illumination that never quite reached the high, vaulted ceilings.

Hermione missed the windows and the fresh air and the constant hiss of the gas feeds drove her to distraction, but she was grateful to them right then for the steady light they gave.

She had most of her plan worked out – except how to get out of Durmstrang. It's always the little things. Always the point A to point B.

Durmstrang, like Hogwarts, had house-elves to take care of the work. And as barbaric as that slavery was, Hermione knew the house-elves knew everything that went on in the castle. Unlike Hogwarts' elves, Durmstrang house-elves were more than willing to appear and ask questions of and interact with people in the castle.

With everything else I've done here, now I'm taking advantage of their servitude!

She stood at the main doors with her packed bags and trunk, and waited. She didn't wait very long before a long-fingered hand tugged on the hem of her jacket.

"Does Miss need help?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I do."

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It had taken Hermione much less time than she thought it would to get to the nearest Bulgarian airport.

After that, catching a plane was easy. The house-elf had helped her convert most of her wizarding money into Muggle money, and a red-eye ticket to any airport in Britain turned out to be cheaper than she'd feared.

Less than three hours after Professor McGonagall was in bed, Hermione was sleeping fitfully on an airport seat, a quiet spell set to wake her half an hour before her flight.

End Chapter

LETTERS IV

Harry was glad to see the letter on his pillow.

Not only was Ginny the only one of his friends writing him, he was enjoying getting to know her. That he hadn't heard from Dumbledore yet – well, that was just proof the old wizard didn't care nearly as much as he said he did.

Harry picked up Ginny's letter and opened it, enjoying the feel of parchment under his fingers again.

Harry,

Okay. I promise that I will always be honest with you, no matter what. I won't try to protect you by not telling you. If I can't do anything else for you, I will do that.

But I expect the same from you! That means rant all you want or need to. If I'm your friend, then that means something that's hurting you is my business. So don't hide things from me or try to protect me from what you're thinking or feeling. It's pushing all that stuff inside that makes you the grouchy and grumpy Harry we had to deal with all last year. Not that you didn't have reason, but you were rather difficult to deal with.

I don't know what to say about Cho Chang. I wish you had never been with her. She wasn't ready, not after Cedric. I'm not sure you were. It's not fair to expect you to know what to do with a girl, or how to think or behave in a relationship. You've never had an example to work from, or anyone to go to for advice. I'll admit I'm mad at Hermione. She didn't handle you and Cho well, didn't tell you what you needed to know.

What's this about a 'saving people thing'? That's what makes you who you are. You're willing to risk yourself to protect someone else? What if what you had seen in your vision had been true? What if Sirius had been in danger? Even if we had been able to talk to him, how do we know that he wouldn't have been forced to tell us a lie? I

can speak from experience – it's hard not to do what He wants when He's in you.

I got very lucky that He didn't make me kill someone. He tried. He made me want to kill. But Colin, Miss Norris, Justin, Hermione, Penelope...they all got away because of luck or poor planning on His part. I'm glad you have a 'saving people thing' or a lot more people would be dead. Like me. Or my father.

It's hard looking at what I did while He was in control as anyone but me. It was my body commanding the Basilisk. It was my hands that strangled the roosters. My hands and my blood wrote the words on the wall. But you're right. It wasn't me.

I guess I know something of what you mean when you talk about being judged based on who other people think you are. I mean, look at how some people treat my family, just because of what my father does, or how much money we don't have or even how many of us there are. People like Draco Malfoy, Snape, the Dursleys are always going to be there. You've just had the bad luck to have them be such powerful forces in your life.

You have an odd way of thinking about us Weasleys. That we're all somehow good guys. Percy may be standing up for what he believes in, but so is Voldemort. Tom Riddle believes with everything in him that Muggle-borns and half-bloods are going to destroy the wizarding world and that the only way to save wizard-kind is to destroy them. Because he sees this as truth, he's made himself the Dark Lord and feels entitled to have the power to do enforce that.

Percy is the same. He believes rules and laws and the structure of the Ministry will be what saves us from Voldemort, not real protection or the violence that has already happened. And he believes because he sees this answer he has the right to be in charge and to tell everyone else what to do. All of us are fighting Voldemort, just like Percy is fighting Voldemort...but we don't believe that just because we're fighting him we automatically have the right to be in charge or to control others.

And yes, Harry, people blame you for being born. I know I do, every day of my life. So do my parents and thousands and thousands of others. You were born, the only son of Lily and James Potter and you did what no one else, not even Dumbledore could do. Because of you, I grew up for eleven years in a world where people didn't hide in fear. If you were to be someone else, then I'm not sure the world I live in would be a very good one. If it was some other baby who had defeated the Dark Lord, Tom might have still been gone, but I don't know that any other baby would have grown up to be who you are.

I like who you are.

You keep saying you're not a good judge of character, but you turned away from Malfoy before you even knew what a Slytherin was or what it meant to be a Malfoy. You refused to become what the Dursleys wanted you to be. At every turn, you have shown that even if you don't always understand what to do around people or how to react to people, you're very good at judging who they are. Except yourself.

There are so many kinds of love, Harry. I think you understand that better than you think. You're selling yourself short, thinking that you won't ever fall in love, get married, have children – have a family around you. Don't listen to prophecies or fears. Listen to me. I am your friend, and I think I am beginning to get to know you.

And I know this: you are a very rare person, Harry Potter. You will not face this alone. I won't let you. Ron and Hermione may be too afraid to write you or too daft to realize you need the letters. But I'm not.

I won't let you face this, or anything, alone. I promise.

Ginny W.

P.S. Write me back. And I didn't want to hit you.

Okay. Maybe a little. But I'm worried about you. I won't spend any of your money without you here to help me spend it!

I'm glad the glove has helped.

End Chapter

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Patience

Eyes peered through the late-evening gloom, staring at the small house, the square windows shimmering with light from inside. He hid in the shadows and watched.

He felt it quite fitting.

He was crouched behind the white-picket fence, behind the tall hedges, hunching over to peer through the foliage to watch the house. Once, it had been his house.

Not for sixteen years. He refused to analyze the knot of emotions threatening to well up from deep inside him. He refused to acknowledge the tears stinging his squinty eyes. He refused to think about how much he wanted to walk up and see if she was still there. He knew she was, but it wasn't the same as seeing her.

He refused to admit that some of the pain in his gut came from guilt.

He clenched his fist, watching the darkness and light play off the strong contours of the smooth silver that had replaced his weak flesh.

Just one more, and I will be the last.

James and Lily fell to the Dark Lord just as he had planned, but their whelp hadn't. He had survived and delayed things nearly two decades, but the Dark Lord had a plan. Wormtail had complete faith in his Lord; thus far, he had not been wrong.

Black had fallen to his own cousin. That left only one.

The wolf. Remus Lupin. A frighteningly subtle man, the only one of the four who had ever guessed how powerful Peter Pettigrew really was. After all...thirteen people with a single curse. Not even James could have done that.

James never knew himself well enough.

Remus knew that was Peter's real power; he had looked inside and stared straight into the darkest, most horrible places in himself and had embraced them. Self-knowledge, self-acceptance; powerful tools in the hands of the right man; a man without shame or dignity; a man willing to make horrific choices.

Yes, a very dangerous thing indeed.

"Do you know why we are here, young Malfoy?" Wormtail directed the question to his charge; a blonde-haired, gray-eyed boy that knelt beside him with admirable poise and control – and all the impatience of his father.

Wormtail despaired his Lord would ever achieve victory when none of his servants understood patience. Sometimes, the Animagus secretly feared even the Dark Lord had forgotten what it meant to wait.

"No. Not really." Though sullen, Draco had learned early on that Peter Pettigrew was more than he seemed, and talking back to the Dark Lord's Silver Hand was a good way to become better acquainted with pain.

The Dark Lord had given him into Pettigrew's tutelage just after Christmas of the previous school year, and Pettigrew's methods, while not always pleasant, were effective. He'd had other teachers, but Pettigrew had been the most effective.

Wormtail nodded sagely, smiling a tight-lipped smile that always made Draco feel cold all over.

"To understand weakness." He paused to wet his lips, his face twitching in a very rat-like manner. "Mine – and through mine, you will understand yours."

Draco frowned, and stared at the house. Wormtail spoke, his voice maddeningly calm.

"She is alone in there...and we will watch her, and we will wait. She lives only because she is bait."

Draco paused; he knew Peter was purposefully being vague. He was supposed to figure out the older wizard's riddle. If he didn't, then the lesson would be worse than it already was.

He thought, and he remembered. His first real test – and yet another failure.

His weakness.

"Your mother lives here, doesn't she?" Draco asked the question softly, watching the house with more intensity.

"Yes." Wormtail smiled, and Draco could taste the bitterness there. "And she waits for me. We were close, my mother and I. No matter how often he comes and tells her who and what I have become, she waits for me."

Draco frowned, fingering his wand. "Doesn't she think you're dead?"

Even Draco Malfoy didn't need to ask who 'he' was – there was only one possibility.

Adjusting his black, hooded cloak, Wormtail bowed his head. "Yes...she has my desiccated finger resting on a shelf next to the medal that tells her I was awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class. She understands patience. She knows the reward for her patience will be a reunion with her beloved son. And thus she waits; she does little except care for the neighborhood children and wait to die; wait to come and find me."

Draco watched as the rotund little wizard cried two silent tears, as much for his mother's pain as his own. It was odd. In many ways, Draco felt contempt for his father. Fear, and a distant sort of loathing for the Dark Lord. Admiration and desire for power, yes. A desire to have a taste of the Dark Lord's power. Awe, maybe. But it was nothing compared to the terror he felt in the face of Peter Pettigrew.

His teacher. His mentor. His friend?

Neither had wanted to define the relationship; there were no such things as friends in Lord Voldemort's court.

The two watched the motorcycle pull up the driveway and the haggard wizard climb off. He walked up to the front door, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

Wormtail watched this through narrowed eyes, as if memorizing every feature on Remus Lupin's silhouetted face.

"He is the only one of them worthy of me." Pettigrew was whispering. "The only one of them I feared. James was weak...trapped between passion and intellect. Lily could have been so much more than she was...but unlike the other three, I wasn't in love with her. I despised her for the lie she forced herself to live." His voice grew hoarse. "Sirius...I regret him the most. Sirius cared for me. He was the first to accept me, the first to defend me. Sirius wasn't supposed to die."

He shrugged. "But Remus Lupin was the only one who knew and understood me, at least a little bit."

Green sparks flickered at the edge of Pettigrew's wand. Draco tensed his hand on his own wand, and waited; he and Pettigrew had attacked before with less cause and against far more powerful opponents.

The two of them could kill Remus Lupin. All it would take was one open wound and one touch by Peter. Just one.

Draco waited, the Severing Charm on the tip of his tongue...but Wormtail rested the silver hand on his shoulder.

"No. The Dark Lord gave me the means to destroy him...proof the Dark Lord is great and rewards his followers well. No, Draco, tonight we wait and watch."

Draco relaxed and settled back to wait...but within moments, Lupin walked out of the house. He paused, and turned towards the bush; his face was cold and his yellow wolf's eyes glinted hungrily. His wand was in his hand.

They'd been seen.

Peter didn't move. Draco didn't dare breathe; every part of him was tensed, ready to strike down the werewolf...a danger to him, merely because he was the son of his father.

Sometimes, Draco wondered how life would be different if his father wasn't who he was.

Finally Lupin turned away, looking disappointed. Draco let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. Peter chuckled, smiling almost patronizingly at Draco.

"Out here, there is nothing to fear from Moony, young dragon. He would call for aid and warn Dumbledore...and we would be gone by the time the Order of the Phoenix spread their wings."

And Remus Lupin would be dead. But why kill him when he still serves a purpose?

They watched Remus walk along the back of the house towards the crumbling stone grotto only a few people knew about. Peter had always been perversely proud they had built the shrine at his mother's house, presumably to honor his 'sacrifice'.

Draco tensed as Remus came closer, but Peter just tightened his hand on his pupil's shoulder. The silver was warm to the touch, but still lifeless and hard.

"Easy, young dragon, easy. Remus isn't even looking at us. We are concealed from him by his own self-absorption. Magic and fear are both unnecessary here. He is far too focused on his grief to know we are here. He is so consumed by pain – pain caused by love – that he does not even think to look. He forgets to be patient. He forgets to be vigilant." Pettigrew laughed softly, his eyes never leaving Remus. "It would take but a single spell or glance to find us. Or a single spell to ward against us. His pain and his love are so all-consuming he thinks of neither."

Draco forced himself to relax and continued observing his former Professor. The ragged man knelt – almost collapsed – before the shrine, lighting two candles in front of two photographs. He went about this with a ritual deliberation, using a taper instead of his wand.

Remus Lupin added a third photograph and a third

Once again, Draco found himself surprised by the calm knowledge Wormtail had; his surety in his understanding of people. Either Wormtail was a genius, or he was mad.

Wormtail urged Draco closer to the shrine; close enough to hear Remus' despairing whisper.

"I'm sorry..." The werewolf whispered to the photographs of Lily and James Potter; Lily blinked her bright green eyes and James smiled reassuringly at his friend. "She won't believe me...and Dumbledore made me leave your son again. I'm sorry I failed him again."

Tears flowing down his face, Remus admitted to the photographs what he had barely admitted to himself.

"We lost Sirius."

The face in the new picture turned to look at him.

Draco listened raptly as Remus recounted in terse, concise phrases the events at the Department of Mysteries...and then described in excruciating detail the death of Sirius Black.

Draco grinned gleefully at the re-telling of Harry Potter's mindless grief, his refusal to accept that his godfather was dead.

Good! About damn time the Golden Boy lost something!

The comparison between Potter's grief and Lupin's grief didn't elude him. They both were weak. They let themselves be ruled by passion – the wrong kind of passion.

Remus sat back and looked at James' image. "You were always the best of us, James...and he is your son."

Peter shook his head and breathed out. Draco knew his mentor didn't know he had spoken the words aloud with the breath.

"No, Remus, you were the best of us. James was the worst..."

Peter turned sharply to Draco. "This is weakness. Observe, learn, understand – weakness is conflict with self. Conflict brings change, and change brings growth. Never deny weakness; accept it, embrace it and confront it."

The smile grew slightly cold, chilling Draco even more. "Fear is a warning of danger. Heed it, listen to it, but obey it as rarely as possible. Remember that to escape from danger can bring you to greater power. Our master's fear of death has brought him to the brink of immortality...and has created our places at his feet."

Draco did not find the thought a comforting one. He was struck by a new thought. I am not weak. I am not afraid, not of the Dark Lord. All he can do is cause me pain, insanity or death. All of which could be my fate without him.

He watched Remus Lupin and he watched Peter Pettigrew and he realized contempt for them both. Peter was content to serve. Lupin was so lost in pain and guilt he couldn't come to terms with the world he lived in.

I will not serve at the Dark Lord's feet. I will stand at his side and I will serve none but him.

Finally, Remus leaned forward to blow out the candles and stand, walking away. A moment later, they heard the growl of the motorcycle's engine.

Peter stood, revealing himself to the silent night. He drew his dark cloak around him, motioning for Draco to do the same.

“Remus is a beautiful example, young dragon. He has never confronted his weakness; his self-doubt, self-loathing. His guilt rules him. His fear rules him.” Peter smiled a perversely triumphant smile and motioned for Draco to follow him. “He could have aided Harry Potter, taught him, helped protect him from both our Master and from the muggles he lives with. He could have given Harry Potter much. Instead, he chose to wallow in the pain of love, to drown in guilt over what he had no choice but to be, and Harry Potter grew up alone. Now, Remus can do little for the son of his best friends. He can do nothing but fight and die like the rest of them. He could have made a difference. He chose not to. That is his greatest failure.”

Peter strode forward, his hood hiding his face in shadow, but he refused to don the white mask of Death Eater...he would not hide his face when he acted in his Master's name.

The Dark Lord had rewarded him for his devotion.

He clasped his wand in the proof of his Master's generosity.

“What are we doing, then?” Draco was cold and tired so he finally lost his fear enough to snap at his teacher.

“We're going to eliminate weakness.”

Draco followed Peter Pettigrew on his way to reward his mother's patience.

End Chapter

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Learning Curve

All too quickly, Harry's days slipped into an odd routine of ups and downs, and the bruises between them.

He woke earlier than the Dursleys and practiced in the bathroom before fixing breakfast and riding with Dudley and Vernon. He and Dudley would part ways at McAllister's. They might occasionally see each other when Gracie had Harry run the track or use a bag; otherwise, they saw each other again when Vernon picked them up.

Harry forced himself to eat dinner every night, barely noticing that as Dudley lost weight and ate less, his portion proportionally shrank. Despite his physical exertion, he was almost never hungry.

After cleaning up from dinner, he followed Dudley outside to spar. Despite the aggression, there seemed to be no hostility or hate as they fought. Dudley was disturbingly intent, focused, driven by something he didn't recognize.

Harry never seemed to gain the upper hand against Dudley. The first time Harry threw a kick, he caught Dudley in the chest and threw the bigger boy back. Next time, Dudley batted Harry's leg aside with contemptuous ease. A kick to Dudley's legs staggered him, but he quickly learned the trick of blocking with the outside of his shins, leaving Harry's legs bruised.

Only Harry's speed and reflexes gave him any edge. He could dart in and strike three times before Dudley had responded to the first blow. He used what Gracie taught him. Control and precision let him land blows, but none of them ever hurt Dudley. Even though Harry got physically stronger by the day, he didn't have the power to do much damage to his cousin. So Harry learned to strike pressure points, joints and learned how to unbalance Dudley or keep him tangled in his own arms and legs. He got in close where he could use his knees and elbows. Dudley, being a boxer, didn't fare as well then. He occasionally managed to land a lock or a hold or a throw on Dudley, but most often he was only able to dart in and out. Dudley, for his part,

only rarely landed a blow on Harry. The smaller boy ducked, wove and twisted like a snake, deflecting Dudley's blows with his arms, shoulders, hands, legs and even his hips. Harry had long since learned how not to get caught or grabbed by an opponent – Dudley had taught him that at a young age – but between the flowing re-direction of tai'chi and the bone-jarring blocks of Kenpo, Harry kept all but a few of his cousin's blows from landing.

Those that did land hurt, though.

Very rarely, the two boys would embrace after a particularly hard bout, but never when Uncle Vernon was watching – and after a few nights, he never stopped watching.

Uncle Vernon smiled every time he saw Dudley land a blow; he silently gloated over every bruise Dudley inflicted.

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What Uncle Vernon started the first night back from Hogwarts escalated the first time Harry had a nightmare.

He had been screaming in his sleep – he couldn't remember if it was Sirius or Cedric, or both.

The door to the cupboard had been wrenched open and Vernon had savagely dragged Harry out, throwing him to floor. His scar had been burning and aching, and his mind twisting with the sensation of Voldemort looking through his eyes.

As he hit the floor, his stomach rebelled and he retched, vomiting what little dinner he'd eaten. Vernon had bellowed, but Harry didn't remember the words.

It was the first time since his Hogwarts letter Uncle Vernon had used anything more than his open hand or his belt.

Harry barely responded, barely reacted as he was struck. All he could hear was Voldemort's breathy laughter echoing through his thoughts.

That was the turning point, the breaking point.

It seemed the catharsis from violently punishing his nephew was too much for Vernon to resist. From then on, he found every excuse to hit Harry; the more unresponsive Harry was, the more aggressive Uncle Vernon became. The simple clink of dishes against one another while Harry washed them – or his unkempt appearance, unshaven and unshowered – would drive Vernon to hit him.

Harry said nothing, the sick feeling of Voldemort sharing his mind, seeing his shame, relishing his pain, his helplessness - began to erode what spark and spirit Harry had left.

There was a part of him that wanted to tell Ginny about it, but he didn't. He was too ashamed.

And there was a part of him that thought he deserved it. Sirius was dead because of him. His parents were dead because of him. Cedric had died because of him, and others would die because of him. If he told Ginny, she might break the Ministry-imposed isolation. He didn't want her or any of his friends in danger.

Harry also knew if he told, Voldemort might see it in his mind.

He hid in his cupboard every night and meditated until Vernon had fallen asleep. He practiced in the bathroom, gave himself a sponge bath, and fell back into bed – but no matter how tired he was, he tried to clear his mind.

The nightmares and vision almost always came, and with them came Uncle Vernon.

No matter how he tried, when Vernon punished him, Voldemort slithered through cracks in his mind, watching and laughing.

Harry was only strong enough to fight one of them at a time. He chose to fight Voldemort, to make every moment of possession an agony for the Dark Lord. He wanted to make every second Voldemort was in his mind an uphill battle.

He knew he was succeeding. He could feel the Dark Lord struggle against him every time he entered Harry's mind.

Voldemort was almost always with him at Privet Drive. The Dark Lord forced Harry to dream, showing him the horrors he wrought; the people he killed. And he mocked Harry for being able to do nothing.

"Some great hero, you are, Harry Potter. That you can just but watch while I control your mind and force you to witness what I do."

Harry knew he couldn't keep Voldemort from seeing the jibe had hit home, but he kept fighting.

The Dark Lord would not win without a fight.

No members from the Order of the Phoenix openly watched the Dursleys, but Harry knew they were there. He felt them following him, like a prickle on the back of his neck. When he paused to listen or watch he could tell where they were. The soft whisper of an invisibility cloak – a sound he knew very well – or faint footsteps gave them away.

He suspected there were Ministry watchers as well, but he never tried to find out. Unmasking a member of the Order would be forgiven. Unmasking a Ministry watcher would not be.

He tried to convince himself the Order's watchers wanted to help him, but couldn't. Little things, like the bar of soap that appeared in the bathroom after Petunia had slapped him for being unwashed and filthy – even though he was never allowed a shower. Or that his glasses re-appeared, repaired, no matter how mangled Vernon left them. Somehow, there were always first-aid supplies in his trunk, or bottles of water next to his bed.

It was proof enough they were trying.

The only time he thought he was alone was with Gracie. Some nameless, growing sixth sense told him they didn't follow him into the gym; nor could he feel Voldemort's presence while he was with

Gracie. He was grateful for the silence and relative solitude while he trained.

At least that was his own.

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Harry clung to his training with Gracie as a lifeline; at least with her he was doing something to prepare himself for what was coming.

After the first week, Gracie had looked at him long and hard. She gauged him and wondered just how far he was willing to take his training. Regardless, there was one question she needed answered.

“How long do we have?”

He wasn't sure how long he had until Dumbledore and the Order had decided he'd had enough and could leave the Dursley's. A part of him wished they would leave him to rot.

Harry had shrugged. “Five or six weeks. Maybe more.”

Gracie had nodded.

Every morning, Gracie began lessons the same way. They stretched enough to keep them from stiffening up and then they sat, legs crossed, facing each other. Eyes closed, he would breathe, focusing on the mantra she had taught him.

Focus.

Focus and Control.

Focused mind. Controlled body.

He would clear his mind, forcing a wall between his thoughts and his emotions, his sensations, and hold it there as long as he could.

Sometimes, when he was having trouble, she put a candle between them. With a flick of her wrist, she would light a match and then the candle.

“Stare at the flame and nothing but the flame. Let it become your entire world. Then feed the flame with your passions, your emotions, your sensations, your thoughts, your dreams – everything. The flame will burn it away until you stand inside a void.”

Harry had the most success with the candle; he could feed it everything but the core of him, the place not even Voldemort had touched, and stand in the void.

Next, they would work through the tai'chi form – or at least as many steps as Harry had learned – a warm-up, she called it.

Each day became more strenuous than the one before. Each day, she added more steps to the form and every day she commented that she noticed he had practiced. How she could tell, Harry never figured out.

Mornings were spent on tai'chi, afternoons on Kenpo; the harder, more aggressive movements and forms were a sharp contrast to the slow grace and seamless unity of tai'chi.

But just like tai'chi, she started Kenpo by teaching him how to stand, how to move, how to walk, how to breathe – before she taught him even the most basic technique. There was almost no aspect of his physical being she left untouched.

As Harry learned one technique, she taught another – there seemed to be no end to variation and kinds of movements.

How to disarm an armed man. How to block. How and when and where to strike. Different kinds of strikes: hand open, hand balled into a fist, the heel of his palm, the stiffened tips of his fingers, elbows and knees. How to kick. When and where to kick. All different kinds of kicks: spin kicks, front kicks, side kicks, back kicks and crescent kicks. A seemingly infinite number of locks, blocks, holds and throws. She

trained him in how to use balance, leverage and movement to master himself and defeat any opponent.

And each movement in Kenpo came at the right time, in the right way.

"Kenpo is a combination of ancient fighting techniques and modern scientific principles; an unending flow of motion – every move creates a specific reaction in your opponent. Each reaction leads you to your next move."

Gracie was walking in a circle around him as he worked the forms. Her voice kept cadence with his motions. She didn't pause or miss a word as her hands adjusted his body, correcting mistakes.

"Every strike is a block; every block, a strike. Each move flows into the next."

Harry eventually lost track of how many days and weeks he'd been training. The days blurred together and he didn't let himself think too much about the nights.

No matter how tired or sore he was, he seemed able to find more energy. Sometimes it seemed like he was able to draw on some bright core inside him. The times he would lose himself in the movements or the meditation, he could sometimes see a flickering green fire just outside of his reach. A part of him wanted to reach that fire, but another part of him rebelled, holding him back from it.

He had written about it in his journey book, expecting Gracie to think he was insane. She had just written back one sentence: 'Don't push it. It'll come.'

He didn't understand her. She was the harshest taskmaster he'd ever known, but she seemed strangely gentle at times. And there were moments where Harry swore she wanted to cross an invisible line between them and reach out to him in some way, but held herself back.

Sometimes, Harry wanted her to cross that line; but more often than not, he was grateful she let him keep his distance.

I don't want her to be hurt because of me.

Gracie still found small ways to reach out to him – like the morning Gracie had walked in and wrinkled her nose.

“Oi, you! Those clothes reek. Here.”

She had thrown him a wad of fabric, which had turned out to be several pairs of loose fitting black pants – the bottom half of the gi uniform he didn't have any way to buy.

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The first time they had sparred, she had him beat in less than a minute. After helping him up, she had asked one of her infuriatingly simple questions.

“What's the best way to keep your opponent from hitting you?”

Harry had thought the answer obvious. “Block the attack; redirect it. Use it to your advantage.”

She had just smiled at him. “The best way not to be hit is to avoid the strike.”

They had spent hours working on how to twist his body, shift his weight or his shoulders to avoid blows. Harry's natural skill at manipulating his body in small ways to maneuver a broomstick served him in good stead, and he picked up that element of fighting quickly. Other techniques were harder; especially some of the theory behind it.

Gracie had explained: “Action and reaction. Every action has – and causes – an equal and opposite reaction. Make your reaction an action in and of itself instead of merely a reaction.”

Harry had just shaken his head. How can I make a reaction an action instead of just a reaction? That doesn't make any sense!

He naturally favored his right hand, and Gracie took merciless advantage of it, adding to his bruises.

Inwardly, she winced every time a blow landed...but a gut instinct – what her mother and sister called ‘maternal clairvoyance’ – told her that she could not go easy on him. Not even a little bit.

“Two hands, kid. They’re equal parts of your body. Neglect one, and you cripple the other. Focus. Balance. Control. Those are the three pillars of anything you do. The same mental and spiritual skills you develop here you can apply to anything.”

He worked hard at using both hands, but relied on his reflexes and speed to give help close the gap in skill between them, but time after time, day after day, Gracie laid him out on the mats.

He always got back up to try again.

Gracie said nothing about her increasingly battered student, but her eyes asked questions that Harry didn’t answer. Like the wand that rested on the chair every day, it was something they didn’t talk about.

“When you’re fighting someone, don’t pay attention to their body. Watch their eyes. The body can lie as easily as the tongue. But the eyes never lie.”

Sometimes, when he looked into her gray eyes, he could see a reflection of her in her eyes, what she was going to do next. Sometimes it helped. Sometimes it didn’t.

He continually marveled at the subtlety of what he was learning. He had seen action movies before, hiding on the stairs and peering at the television. The martial arts the movie stars used were so different from the almost gentle lethality Gracie was trying to impart to him.

There were moments when she frightened him – moments when he caught a glimpse of what she was truly capable of.

It was those moments when he most wanted to learn more; to become someone that could fight Voldemort. He wanted to just draw her knowledge and skill from her and let it pour into him...

But all he could do was practice.

Every afternoon, they sparred. They breathed in sync as they whirled and spun, Harry finding the same fierce pleasure in sparring her he did sparring Dudley, though he had long since figured out he did as well as he did because she was teaching him. The harder he tried, the better he did. When he got overconfident or stopped thinking, Gracie punished him for it.

"Control, kid. Focus and control of self. Train your spirit as you train your body, developing inner strength, balance and harmony as you learn. A martial artist is more than a master of fighting; he is a master of himself."

Every time he started to feel confident in what he'd learned, that he was getting close to learning enough, he reminded himself of that night at the Ministry of Magic. He never wanted to forget what his arrogance caused; what his stupidity had cost him – and what it had cost everyone he had dragged along in his wake.

But there was one phrase she only had to repeat once that drove home what he had failed to do. Failed to be. Gracie had spoken softly, as if she knew the words were knives.

"Anger is defeated self."

He winced, thinking of that night in Dumbledore's office.

...he felt the white-hot anger lick his insides, blazing in the terrible emptiness, filling him with the desire to hurt Dumbledore for his calmness and his empty words...

..."THEN-I-DON'T-WANT-TO-BE-HUMAN!" Harry roared, and he seized one of the delicate silver instruments from the spindle-legged table and flung it across the room. It shattered into a hundred tiny pieces against the wall...

Harry bowed his head in shame.

End Chapter

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Breaking the Habit

Routine had become Harry Potter's saving grace. He didn't have to think; only do. The only times he was really awake and thinking were in Gracie's gym.

Then one morning his routine changed. It was a small thing, but well worth noticing. That morning – he thought it was a Friday – his Uncle didn't hit him. In fact, Vernon seemed nervous. He was up earlier than normal, and didn't once growl at Harry for not having breakfast ready when he sat down to eat.

When the three of them left that morning, Vernon was driving. After the first two mornings, Dudley had driven to and from McAllister's. That morning, Vernon drove. He still had Harry roll down his window with the grunt of: "You're filthy and you stink, boy. Haven't they taught you to bathe at that school of yours?"

The first time Vernon had said that, Harry had scowled back. "I can bathe myself just fine, if you'd let me."

Vernon's response had left him with bruised ribs and the decision not to talk back. That morning, like most every morning before it, Harry just rolled down the window.

When they were almost to the gym, Vernon cleared his throat. "Only Potter is going to be there today. And I've arranged for him to spend the night with McAllister."

Dudley turned and looked at his father. "What?"

Vernon shifted in his seat. "You're coming with me. There is a Summer Ball tonight, and I've arranged for you to escort the daughter of one of my managers."

"No. I'm not going to some dance with your lackey's daughter. I'm going to train."

Vernon turned to regard Dudley with a heavy glare. "You're going, and that's final. Veronica is helping pay for these lessons, and she's insisted on it. She'll be meeting us at the tailor's to get you sized. Your old suit doesn't fit anymore."

"I said no." Dudley met his father's glare.

"You don't have a choice, Dudders," Vernon said with a sigh. "You go, or Veronica stops paying. We can't afford to pay for the training for very long if she doesn't help, even with what the woman gave us at the beginning of the summer."

It was a shock to hear Vernon arguing rationally with Dudley, as if what Dudley said mattered.

Harry was surprised, to say the least. I'll be spending the night with Duncan? Dudley has a date?

The car came to an abrupt stop half a block from the gym. "Get out, boy. You can walk the rest of the way."

Harry fumbled with the seatbelt and clambered out of the car, barely shutting the door before Vernon pulled away, tires screeching on pavement.

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"Focus and control. Focused mind, controlled body."

Gracie whispered the words to Harry as he worked through the tai'chi form, this time determined to move as slowly as he could. This was his first time completing the Long Form, and he'd be damned if he'd screw it up. Not when he'd come so far this summer.

He was amazed at himself. Despite the lack of food and the lack of sleep, he felt himself getting stronger and faster. His muscles were starting to remember the moves before his mind did, and he could feel the difference in how he moved. He was more balanced, more

graceful. He marveled at the smooth power behind some of the movements he'd learned.

On the other hand, he was confused. He knew he was painfully skinny, battered and bruised and worn to a thread. Even so, he rarely felt truly hungry and even though he was tired and in constant pain from sore muscles, daily beatings, and the unceasing agony from his scar, there always seemed to be one last dreg of energy and effort he could call up.

There were times he felt he was in a fog, operating on pure instinct and ingrained habit like some kind of automaton. Other times, mostly when he trained with Gracie and sparred with Dudley, he felt alive – tired and worn down – but alive, awake and aware. And other times, when he worked forms or meditated, he felt like he let go completely and he didn't notice pain or fatigue. There was just the bright power shining inside him and the natural grace of the movements.

The morning of Dudley's big date, the morning of his first attempt at the entire long form, was one of those times. He breathed and he closed his eyes and he let go.

Time stretched out as he moved, each breath becoming slower and slower. He forgot about Gracie...forgot about Dudley...forgot about anything beyond the motion.

In that moment, he felt as free as he did when he was flying.

He could feel something flowing through him, clean and clear and bright. Whether it was magic of the chi Gracie always talked about, he wasn't sure. He didn't care.

It felt wonderful.

As he finished and the exhilaration faded, Gracie grinned at him. "Not bad, kid, not bad at all. Now hit the showers."

Harry blinked. "What? It's not even noon!"

“I said hit the showers, kid. I’ve got to go shopping, and I’m taking you with me.”

Harry blinked. “Why?”

Gracie laughed again. “‘Cause I’m not letting you sit around here all day and mope. And seriously – how long as it been since you had a shower?”

“A while,” Harry admitted with a shrug. “But I could practice more. I...I really need to. And I don’t mope. I brood.”

Gracie shook her head. “Nope, sorry, kid. There’s a time for practice and a time to let it all sink in. You’ve been practicing all summer. Besides, if you’re staying at my place tonight, you’re gonna have to smell better than you do now.”

Harry blinked, and shook his head. “I’m staying with you? I thought...”

She looked at him sternly. “Shower, now.”

Meekly, Harry hung his head and mumbled a question, but Gracie had already anticipated him. From behind one of the chairs, she threw him a large, worn black leather backpack.

“Men’s showers are out the door and to your left. There’s soap, shampoo, and clothes in the bag.”

Quietly, and suddenly feeling very awkward, Harry crept back into the main gymnasium and into the men’s locker room. Unzipping the bag, he pulled out a pair of black cargo pants and a black t-shirt. Both were obviously second hand, but they looked to be a closer fit and in much better condition than anything he currently had – at least, anything that wasn’t from Hogwarts.

He also found a small bottle of shampoo and a travel-sized bar of soap.

The shower was pure rapture. It was the first one he’d had all summer, and it felt wonderful to be completely clean for the first time

in weeks. The hot water had done wonders for a lot of his aches and some of the fog seemed to have cleared.

He had meant to use the soap and shampoo sparingly, but he found by the end of his shower they were all but gone. Climbing out, he scrubbed himself dry with a large towel, feeling better than he had since leaving Hogwarts.

He dug around a little more in the backpack and found a toothbrush and toothpaste, and to his embarrassment, a pair of black boxers.

What's the black motif all about?

He brushed his teeth, surprised at both the difference in their color, and the fresh flavor in his mouth; he had gotten used to the sour taste.

To his amazement, he noticed his face still looked dirty, but on closer inspection, he saw black stubble.

He blinked. I have to shave?

Sure enough, Gracie had thought to include a razor and shaving cream in the bag

He sighed, and sprayed a large dollop of shaving cream into his open palm, slathering the cool foam on his face. He picked up the razor, and stopped.

I don't know how to shave.

Obviously, he couldn't ask Vernon how...and no one else had bothered to mention it before. It was something Sirius would have taught him.

His throat clenched and his eyes burned, but he blinked them clear.

Well, best give the best go of it I can.

He was slow, and careful, and managed not to nick himself, but his face was burning like he had spilled acid on it.

He dug around the backpack some more, praying Gracie had thought of this, too. He found the deodorant and aftershave under a pair of (thankfully, white) socks.

He splashed it on his face, breathing a sigh of relief as the burning was replaced by pleasant stinging coolness.

He made use of the deodorant and dressed. He had to cinch his belt tight around the cargo pants, but not as tightly as he would have Dudley's pants. The t-shirt fit tightly, but it wasn't too uncomfortable. He made a token effort with his hair, but he had long since learned it was no use.

He also took the opportunity to wash his glove. He'd rinsed it out every time he got to give himself a sponge bath at the Dursley's, but it was starting to smell a bit ripe. He hadn't really noticed it until he smelt a bit better himself. He wasn't sure what muggle soap would do to dragonhide so he settled for rinsing it thoroughly and set it aside to dry.

Slipping his wand down the large side pocket of the cargo pants, he transferred the rest of the contents of his pockets (house key he had stolen from Dudley – he didn't have one of his own – his broken watch, a bronze knut, and some lint) to the new pants.

I'm staying with her tonight? The thought was slowly sinking in that he wouldn't be staying at Privet Drive that night. He suddenly felt dizzy, and sat down on a bench.

The idea of staying with Gracie made his stomach feel like butterflies were practicing dive-bombing raids. He was very fond of his teacher, and a large part of him was glad he was staying with her and not Duncan, but he was also terrified, and couldn't pin down why.

The way Gracie looked at him sometimes, as if she could look through him reminded him of Dumbledore. It made him want to tell her things – the truth about who he was, why he needed to learn.

If she looks at me like that tonight, I might just tell her. I...

He blinked away tears. He couldn't tell her. Even if he could trust her, he couldn't put her at risk like that. He couldn't think of a way to avoid staying with her – potentially making her a target. But the less she knew, the safer she would be.

I'm barely holding together and I have to make her think I'm a Muggle...I have to hide everything from her when there's nothing for us to do but talk. What am I going to tell her?

On the verge of panic, he stuffed his old clothes and the toiletries into the backpack and trudged back into Gracie's gym. His glove wasn't dry yet, so he tucked into his belt, admonishing himself to keep his hand hidden as best he could.

She had showered too, and was dressed in jeans, sneakers and a t-shirt that read 'What if the Hokey-Pokey Really Is What It's All About?'

Her long gray hair was in a braid down her back, and she had on a pair of green-lensed sunglasses.

She looked him up and down; he was still too damn skinny, but his new muscle filled out the t-shirt well. He looked like he felt better; his eyes were brighter and she could see where being clean had done a world of good for his scratches and cuts.

"You clean up nice, kid."

Harry blushed, not really sure why he was blushing. He looked at his feet.

She grinned. She wished she'd known what to get him other than black, but she had never been great shakes at fashion – and Duncan's spare clothes bin hadn't had much in the way of selection. Quite the opposite, actually.

Still, he looks like he feels better. I just wish he'd shaved.

She peered a bit closer, and noticed he had tried to shave, but hadn't done a very good job of it.

Gracie was startled to see he had forgotten to put his ever-present glove back on, and she could see something on the top of his right hand. It looked almost like writing.

A tattoo, maybe?

Uncomfortable with her scrutiny, he tucked his journey book and pen into the backpack and tried not to look as nervous as he felt.

"You didn't have to give me all this stuff..."

She snorted at him, reminding him strangely of Ginny Weasley. "No, I didn't, but I couldn't have you trailing after me looking like a street bum I'd picked up somewhere. I didn't know you'd be staying with me 'til early this morning. I didn't think you'd have a change of clothes, so I threw that together. It's just stuff left over from an old student of Duncan's and an old bag of mine." She shrugged, looking slightly uncomfortable herself. "Keep it. I haven't used it years."

Harry mumbled his thanks, but intended to return the bag before he left for Hogwarts.

I won't take charity. Not even from her.

But isn't that what the Weasleys offered?

That's different. Molly Weasley would put a Full Body Bind on you and force-feed you if you said no.

Thinking of the Weasleys – and of how Molly always mothered him, made his stomach burn. He missed them. He hoped Ginny had kept them up-to-date on him, but he also hoped she hadn't let anyone else read the letters. Especially his last one.

What was I thinking, writing all that stuff down anyway?

He saw Gracie staring at him again, the look in her eyes reminding him of the look Dumbledore had given him his second year, when he'd asked Harry if there were anything Harry had wanted to tell him. Like then, Harry desperately wanted to tell Gracie everything, but he didn't think it was a good idea. Even if she believed him, he didn't want to drag her into his fight with Voldemort, let alone the war that was brewing in his world.

End Chapter

LETTERS V

Ginny had started leaving her window open for Hedwig to come and go as she pleased. Getting up in the middle of the night to let her out to hunt or back in when she'd caught dinner had quickly gotten old.

But she still found herself waiting up for Hedwig to come back every night, hoping the owl would bring a letter from Harry. She also knew sitting in the dark waiting for him to send her a letter wasn't doing her mental state any good, but it didn't stop her from doing it.

It had been a while since his last letter. She was starting to worry she'd said something wrong in her last letter, something that had made him not want to write her back. Or that something had happened to him that kept him from writing back.

So she sat in the dark and waited.

Hedwig swooped in the open window and deposited a folded sheaf of paper on her lap. Ginny grinned and grabbed the spear of amethyst crystal from her nightstand and – with a push of her magic against it – deep violet light flared into existence. She had discovered the crystal's power by accident one of the many nights she'd been waiting for the letter she now held. She noticed he had written on the strange Muggle paper again, and shook her head. She'd have to ask him to bring some for her father.

His handwriting was neat, cramped print, the lines of dark green ink were all clear and perfect, as if the quill he'd been using hadn't bled or smeared or had to be re-dipped.

Ginny,

Thank you.

Your promise means more to me than I know how to tell you. That there is at least one person who will be completely honest with me...it helps.

I promise that I will always be honest with you, too. I won't hide things from you or try to protect you from what I'm thinking or feeling – with one caveat. There are things that I've been told by Dumbledore that I can't tell you. I want to. Even as I'm writing this, I want so badly to tell you, but I can't.

I hate secrets, Gin. They destroy people. They eat people alive from the inside out, or they hide things from people who need to know them. They damage the foundations of trust and I'm not sure I know how to re-build those.

And I hate that secrets mean I can't make the same promise to you that I asked you make to me. I didn't realize it until I read your last letter. It's taken me a long time to get the courage to write this to you because of it. I'm sorry for that, too. I miss getting your letters.

I will promise that I will tell you first. Before Ron and Hermione, even. They are my best friends – my brother and my sister, I suppose. I'd like to think what we feel for each other is at least as strong as that, anyway. But they haven't ever made me the same promise you did. I guess it's not fair of me to be upset about that. I never asked them. It's just, they know me. I'd like to think they know how I feel about that sort of thing. Maybe they don't.

Sometimes, I think my entire life has been following some script someone's already written for me, and everyone knows my lines but me. Everyone seems to think they know what's best for me, and will do whatever they need to do to get me to do it. Everyone but you and Gracie.

I can't believe I haven't mentioned Gracie yet. I guess I didn't know what to say about her. She's like a muggle Dumbledore, only she's a lot like you. Honest, straightforward, and blunt. She seems to care about me, a lot. I don't know why she does, really, and I feel bad because I can't tell her the truth about who and what I am. If I ever did, I don't think she'd believe me. Even if she did...she'd be mad that I lied to her for so long. And I'd lose her to the Obliviators or to Voldemort. It makes me feel like I'm using her to teach me what I need to know without giving anything back. I know she said I'd be

helping her re-pay a debt, but it still feels like I'm getting more out of this than she is. If only that she's there

This summer, except for Gracie and your letters, I've been alone. I used to be good at being alone, Gin. Very good at it. I knew how to make my mind go blank, to just turn off so time passed without me knowing it. To just...drift, and just be. I miss it. These days, I can feel every second as it stretches by, dragging me with it into the next. The quiet can drown me and I almost look forward to dinner with Dursleys. Uncle Vernon's cousin, Veronica, is staying here now in Dudley's second bedroom. She doesn't hate me because she doesn't know what I am. Not to say she's very fond of me, but as long as I sit and listen to her talk, she's someone to be around, you know?

I've realized how much I rely on my friends to keep me sane and keep the quiet from drowning me, and now I can't believe I tried to push you away. Voldemort's going to try to kill you regardless of you being near me. He knows what you mean to me.

It's been your letters that made me realize that. Without your letters, I wouldn't be able to remember I had friends. I'm too detached, too distant out here to remember what it feels like all the time, but any time I forget, I can just pull out your letters and I can remember.

Thank you for that.

In case I forgot to say it before, thank you for coming with me to the Department of Mysteries. Thank you for making me take you with me. I wouldn't have survived without you fighting with me. As much as I hate that I caused Sirius' death and as much as I hate I caused all of you to get hurt, what I know now...if I had gone alone, or with just Ron and Hermione, it would have been worse. For everyone. I hate that, too.

You're right about Sirius. Even if I had talked to him, I would have had no way of knowing if he was really in danger. Voldemort set the perfect trap. I want to blame myself for not knowing, for not practicing my Occlumency. But being alone gives a bloke a lot of time to think. I taught the DA last year, and though I'm no great teacher like Professor McGonagall, I learned a lot about teaching. I've paid

attention to how Gracie teaches me. I've also been watching my cousin Dudley train this summer, watching how his trainer works. He's like Snape. He yells, snarls, insults, but he's still a good teacher.

Snape isn't. He didn't teach me, he didn't explain anything. His method was to just keep hurting me until I could make him stop. I haven't been able to protect myself from him since I was eleven. I can protect myself from Voldemort and Death Eaters but I can't protect myself from the people who are supposed to take care of me. From Snape, Umbridge, my relatives...I'm not allowed to protect myself or my friends from Draco Malfoy. I'm supposed to be a Gryffindor. One of the good guys. I can get away with breaking every rule in the book, but I'm not allowed to protect myself from the people who aren't supposed to be involved in this war.

I guess it really doesn't matter what they do to me. They can attack me, hurt me all they want. I can take it. I can take more than they could ever do to me. But if they try to hurt you or any of my other friends this year, I'm not going to stand for it.

What Dumbledore told me – well, I can use it to my advantage and protect the people I care about from the consequences of being people I care about. I'm tired of my friends being hurt just because they're my friends. I don't really know if I deserve what I get. Sometimes I think I do. Sometimes I think I really am my father's son and someone has to pay for his sins. And Sirius'. I should have to pay. Not you. I would gladly take whatever penance is due, if they would just let you and everyone else close to me live your lives.

I'm not going to let myself be helpless this year. I won't let what they do make me treat my friends like they treat me. I'm sorry for that. Especially for treating you that way. You've never hidden anything from me or tried to trick or manipulate me. In some ways, I feel like Cho tried to manipulate me into doing what she wanted.

I don't know what Cho was doing with me. I didn't know how to say no to her. I was still attracted to her, in a twisted and uncomfortable way, but I wasn't comfortable being with her. I wanted her forgiveness, I think, for what happened to Cedric. Yet, it hurt more than I wanted to

admit when she got mad at me for wanting to meet up with Hermione on Valentine's Day. It made me mad, too. I didn't realize how mad until later, when she defended Marietta for betraying the DA. Hermione has followed me, sometimes blindly, into things that she didn't have to follow me into. I owe her the same loyalty and the same trust. If someone I'm with can't understand that, can't understand who and what I am and who asks me to put them in front of that loyalty and trust, then I can't be with them. Which is probably counter-productive to having a girlfriend, I'd bet.

I'm not good at this romance thing. You're right – I don't know what to do in a relationship, and until Voldemort stops trying to kill me and people stop trying to hurt me and break me, I don't know that I'll be able to find out. I'm afraid, Ginny.

I'm afraid that after it's all over, I won't be able to figure it out. I'll have become something so different, so torn – maybe so broken – that I won't be able to love someone like that. And I want to. I don't want to be alone like this.

Even Neville can go out on a date like a normal person. I can't manage that much. The Great Harry Potter...

I'll end up a hermit like Mrs Figg, surrounded by magical creatures, living in a hut in the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid would like that, I think.

Don't be mad at Hermione. She's the smartest person I know, and she's really good at figuring things – and people – out, but she's not good at interacting with people. I'm not, either, so I understand how hard it is for her, a little bit. She cares and wanted to help, but she didn't know I didn't know. Just look at her and Ron.

Hermione's right more often than not, though. She was right about the Department of Mysteries and she's right about my 'saving people thing'. It can be dangerous and stupid and can get me in trouble, but I can't just sit and wait when I can keep someone from dying. Even if it were Snape or Draco, or even Umbridge. I'm probably wrong for saying this, but I don't care if my 'saving people thing' is stupid or dangerous or whatever. After the Chamber, I asked Dumbledore about the similarities between me and Tom Riddle. He told me that

it's my choices that make me different from him. I chose Gryffindor. I chose to save you. I chose to try and save Sirius. Voldemort would have chosen to leave them both to die. If I choose to leave someone to die when I could save them, then I become a little bit more like him.

I'm not like him.

Neither are you. He may have made you want to kill, but he couldn't make you a killer. He put a part of himself into you and had to change who you are to make you capable of murder. It wasn't you. It never could be you. You're not that kind of person.

If people can't see that and can't see past the surface of hand-me-down robes and the horror of being possessed by Tom Riddle, then it's their loss, not yours. You said it yourself: I can't avoid being the Boy Who Lived. I am the Boy Who Lived. I am the person who has defeated Voldemort more times than any other wizard alive, except maybe Dumbledore.

And I am proud to call you, Ginevra Weasley, my friend. You and your friendship are worth more money than Malfoy and I have combined. So is all of your family, even Percy.

He may think he has the right to tell everyone else to do, but he's not much different from Dumbledore, who has been manipulating me and my life since I was born. The difference, small though it is, is that Dumbledore didn't want to. He had to. I suppose Percy feels he is doing as he has to, but he enjoys controlling others, and that scares me. I still think he believes he's doing the right thing, though.

I said I don't like who I'm becoming, and I meant it. I don't like who I'm becoming because people are controlling me, or trying to control me. They're trying to make me into who they think I should be, and sometimes, I wonder if they're right.

You say you like who I am, but I'm afraid I can't be that person much longer. That person can't survive unbroken against everyone who wants to hurt me and control me. That person is tired, and lonely and hurting and has precious little left to give and to hold on to. That person wants to just let go, to drift away and keep drifting away until

he drifts so far he is nothing at all. That person doesn't know how he can live another day in this house, another day trapped like Sirius was trapped. That person might not exist when I come to Hogwarts.

The person I am becoming is not a person I like at all. And if you're right about me being a good judge of character, that bothers me. But the person I am becoming has the strength to do what needs to be done. The strength to be alone and to keep fighting no matter what people do to him.

I may not like who I am becoming, but at least I know who he is and what he is. He is stronger than who I am now, strong enough to do what needs to be done, both before and after Voldemort is defeated.

And he will be defeated.

I'm glad you've given up on me. I could never give you what you deserve; I can't allow myself to be the kind of man who could be good to you. This next year, what I really look forward to is seeing you happy – whether it's with Dean or someone else. Seeing Ron and Hermione finally figure out and admit what they feel for each other – maybe have a bit of happiness themselves.

Speaking of Ron and Hermione...would you mind telling them I miss them? Maybe tell them it's okay to write to me?

I can understand why they might not want to, but I just want to make sure they know.

I miss you, too. I hope we can talk to each other like we write to each other. If we can't, you're going to get a lot of letters from me this year.

Harry Potter

P.S. Then I guess I'll just have to take you shopping before we go back to Hogwarts.

Ginny sat with his letter in her lap and tried to figure it out. Most of it made sense, but there were a few things that didn't. Who was Gracie,

for one? For two...it almost seemed as if Harry did have feelings for her, but couldn't – or wouldn't – act on them.

Had he really just told her that it didn't matter how he felt? That there was no chance for her?

No. She slowly realized what Harry had been trying to say. He meant there was no chance for him.

End Chapter

Revised 12-25-07

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Searching Surrey

Hermione Granger had traversed more distance in a shorter amount of time than she ever had before, at least without a portkey.

First, by plane to London's Heathrow airport, then by train to Little Whinging, Surrey. Now, by taxi to 4 Privet Drive, after a brief pause at the train station to shower, eat, change clothes and secure her trunk in a locker.

Fairly rested, and encouraged by the success of her plan – the Order of the Phoenix had not intercepted her or even contacted her – Hermione was feeling ready to find out what was going on with Harry.

Which was the only part of her plan she was sure of. Never one to hesitate once she'd made a decision, Hermione had acted with speed and efficiency in getting from Durmstrang to Little Whinging, and she was positive she'd be able to track Harry down.

It was what happened after she found Harry she wasn't sure about. She sat in the backseat of the taxi, and tried not to think about it. She couldn't go home. Her mother would be livid, and after running away, she would never be allowed to go back to Hogwarts. The Order was likely to be just as furious with her, and she wasn't sure what kind of reception she would receive at the Burrow, at least not after her letter to Ron.

I've made a right mess of things.

There was really only one thing left to do: see her plan through, and hope everything would turn out right in the end.

She was ashamed to admit there was a small part of her that hoped Ginny was right, that Harry really did need her. Because if he didn't, then she would have thrown everything away for nothing.

Maybe not nothing.

Even if Harry was okay, what Ginny had said had merit...a lot of merit. They – Harry's friends - couldn't leave Harry to deal with things alone. Even if he wasn't hurt or wallowing in grief, she would see he was fine with her own eyes, and be able to reassure Ginny that he was fine.

Maybe she would even have the chance to get him out of the Dursley's for an afternoon, maybe take him to lunch – and maybe get him to talk about things. Things he didn't like to talk about: the Third Task, Dolores Umbridge, the Department of Mysteries, and Sirius Black.

Regardless, my logic is sound. There is something going on that we don't know about it, and it involves Harry and probably that thrice-damned prophecy the Order was guarding.

Logic and reason had never failed her before, and she didn't think it would now. Now, if only I knew the logic to apply to get Harry's relatives to let me see him.

"We're here, miss," The cabby said, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"Thank you, sir." She smiled at him, paid and tipped him, and climbed out of the cab, discreetly letting Crookshanks out. He knew what to do.

Like most of the Wizarding world, she had never seen this house. Like most the Wizarding world, she had read of it. In the books, the Dursleys were described as a middle-class British family of good standing in the community.

Five years as Harry's friend had given her a different idea of them. She had imagined it countless times in her mind as a horrible and dark place, bars on the windows and locks on the doors – a place where a small boy would be kept prisoner in a cupboard under the stairs.

Instead, the bushy-haired witch found a cheerful, bright little house with a meticulously tended garden. The tall woman tending it stood

slowly and peered at the cab and watched with pursed lips as the girl climbed out of it.

Petunia knew the idiot boy had sent his bird away, and hadn't been writing. Despite what that Umbridge woman had said, she knew there had been nothing to do but wait for one of them to come.

Now, it appeared someone had. Petunia was surprised at who they had chosen to send. The girl climbing out of the cab looked normal, but Petunia knew she wasn't. She was looking too intensely at the house and at her.

The girl wasn't tall, or short. She had on a flowing skirt and sleeveless blouse; her hair was bushy, but seemed elegant in that effortlessly windblown way. Her brown eyes and smiling face were attractive, but not stunning. She had a clumsy natural grace, as if she were still getting used to the idea of not tripping over her own feet. Her eyes didn't match the rest of her. The girl's eyes were full of sharp intelligence that drank in and analyzed everything she saw. They were eyes that had seen more than the girl's apparent age would lend one to think.

They were the eyes of someone who knew too about too many things and wasn't afraid to use that knowledge.

It was her eyes that convinced Petunia Dursley this girl was the one they had sent to check on the boy. Not even that Umbridge woman would have seen this one coming.

"Petunia Dursley?" The girl spoke politely, and at Petunia's grimace, she strode forward, thrusting out her hand. "I'm Hermione Granger. Pleased to meet you."

Petunia shook her hand curtly. "What do you want?"

Hermione's face lost all pretense of courtesy. "Where's Harry?"

Petunia sneered. "As if that's any of your business? The boy is well fed, watered, and unharmed. Let us be."

Hermione frowned. Her gut instinct told her something was wrong. She didn't want to press things, to get Harry in trouble, but she wasn't going to back down now and leave when she was positive she needed to be there.

"Fine." Hermione glared at Petunia. "Then let me see him."

Petunia huffed. "You know good and well he's not here right now, girl. I know your kind has been watching us all summer." Her husband might have been too blind to notice how many times the boy's glasses re-appeared, miraculously repaired or that he always seemed to have first aid supplies. But she saw it, and she knew what it meant. They were watching. "He's with his cousin, at McAllister's Gym, training. Just like every day."

Hermione sucked in a deep breath. "I want to see where he's staying."

Petunia's mouth curled in a hostile caricature of an inviting smile, and ushered Hermione inside. Another woman was bustling around in the kitchen, causing delicious smells of fresh baked bread to waft through the house.

The house itself was meticulously clean and decidedly well decorated. It had the air of belonging to people who thought far more of themselves than they had a right to, but it also spoke of more money than was apparent combined with understated good taste.

The other woman bustled out of the kitchen, her clothes perfectly pressed and arranged, her make-up spotless despite having been cooking all morning. She was nearly as broad as she was tall, with a crown of dark graying hair and the stern but warm eyes of a woman who had spent her life raising other people's children.

"Petunia, coming in already? Oh, my! I didn't realize we had company!"

"Erm, yes. It appears we do." Petunia was obviously hard-pressed to try to appear gracious in front of this other woman.

“Veronica Dursley, at your service.” The woman held out a freshly washed hand, shaking Hermione’s with the gentle vigor of a born and bred socialite.

“Hermione Granger, ma’am. I go to school with Mrs Dursley’s nephew.”

Hermione knew that was a gamble. She had no idea what this woman knew – or thought of – Harry.

Veronica narrowed her eyes at Hermione. “I somehow doubt you go to St Brutus Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys.”

Hermione feigned surprise. “No ma’am! I’ve never heard of such a place! Harry and I both go to Straghow Preparatory!”

“Hmm, I see.” Veronica looked at Petunia, who coughed slightly. “I’ve heard of Straghow. Expensive private school. It’s a good school. Invitation only.” Her face broke out into a grin. “Petunia! I knew you and Vernon were doing more for the boy than you let on! You could have told me!”

“Yes, well...” Petunia tried to demure, “it was set up by his parents, and...”

“Yes, yes.” Veronica nodded as she went about preparing tea. “Dudley would have none of it. He’s the apple of your eye, but has quite the jealous streak. And with all the problems Harry seems to have...yes, yes I can see why you’re doing what you’re doing.” She smiled. “I always said you were a better mother than you gave yourself credit for!”

Hermione felt a chill.

“Thank you, Veronica...coming from you, that’s quite a compliment.” Petunia smiled uneasily.

“Nonsense, Petunia! I only say what I see. Now, why don’t you two have a spot of tea? There’s fresh bread in the kitchens if either of you get hungry.” She set the tea service down on the dining table. “I do so

hate to be rude, dear, but I have an appointment that I simply must keep. I'm going to be late as it is!"

Somehow managing to make hurrying seem dignified, Veronica grabbed her purse and keys and was out the door in a flash of pearls and heels.

Hermione didn't even make a pretense of it. "Show me where he stays, Petunia Dursley."

Her sneer would have done Snape proud as she sat down at her table and poured a cup of tea. "The cupboard under the stairs, girl. Veronica has his old bedroom."

Hermione wanted to stand and gape at the woman; to stand there and scream at her, but she knew it wouldn't do her, or Harry, any good. She marched over to the stairs and opened the cupboard.

The smell alone almost knocked her over. Fetid, still air washed over her, and she gagged. In one corner, there was a wastebasket filled with drying vomit and blood-stained bandages. Harry's Hogwarts trunk was at the foot of his cot, serving as a makeshift table for rolls of gauze and first aid tape. There was only one light bulb, which appeared to be loose in its socket.

She tightened it, and under its unfiltered light saw the sweat and blood-stained cot; not a single sheet or pillow, just a bare mattress. Her stomach lurched, threatening to rebel.

Barely able to think, Hermione turned off the light and closed the door, trembling with barely suppressed rage.

A soft meow startled her. Crookshanks slipped out of the downstairs bathroom.

She knelt down, and the ginger-furred cat walked up, looking as worried and downcast as Hermione felt.

"Find anything?"

He mewed mournfully, and dropped a bloody scrap of cloth into her outstretched hand. She scooped him up and helped him back into her backpack.

Hermione hesitated a moment before drawing her wand and stalking back around to the kitchen.

“How could you?” Her wand was pointed directly at Petunia, who was seated at the table, sipping tea.

“You wouldn’t dare, girl.” Petunia glared back. She knew how to handle these people. She’d learned that much from her sister. “I’m pregnant, and I doubt even your kind would forgive you if you hurt an unborn child.”

You bloody-minded bitch. Hermione wanted to scream, but she forced herself to keep calm. Her eyes were burning with tears. She could barely speak. How could they do this to him? What had they done to him?

Ginny was right...I was right...oh my god, what have we let happen...

“Where is he?”

“I told you. McAllister’s Gym. He helps his cousin train there.” Petunia was calm, sipping tea. “Go find him, if you must. But you and I both know you can’t take him.” Her smile made Hermione’s blood boil.

“And who’s going to stop me?”

Often called the smartest witch of her generation, Hermione Granger was well known for her knowledge of magic and her surprising power – but only a rare few caught a glimpse of the passion underneath the scholar. Ron, Harry, and Ginny had seen her passion at its best and at its worst. Petunia Dursley was the first person to see that passion turn dark.

Her eyes narrowed, and she leveled her wand at Petunia.

Petunia slid a piece of parchment across the table. "Dolores Umbridge. Delightful woman. She paid us a visit the evening Harry got home from that...place...and gave us this letter."

Hermione read the letter, crumpling it in her fist. "That toad! I should have made sure the Centaurs had finished the job!" She threw the letter back at Petunia. "Where's your phone? I need to call a cab."

She snorted. "You're a schoolgirl, child. I know the look about you. 'Organization' or no, you're not what you're claiming to be. You won't use your powers on me. You can walk."

Hermione looked up at her with a deceptively innocent smile.

"I'm not? Magic is a tool, Petunia, not a weapon. No, my revenge will be much simpler. I will merely take proof of Harry's mistreatment to both the Muggle and Wizarding press. Your adoring public will do far more than I ever could."

Petunia Dursley turned a shade of puce her husband would have been proud of, but before she could speak, Hermione waved her wand.

"Now call me a cab or I will summon the Knight Bus right to your front door."

- 0 -

The cabby knew exactly where McAllister's Gym was.

In fact, his answer when she asked him if he knew where it was made her wish she'd kept more abreast of the Muggle world.

"Who doesn't, 'round these parts? Duncan McAllister, the European boxing champ, trains there. Brings a few celebrities through every now and again."

There was no mistaking that this was the place. The name was emblazoned proudly above the front door – which was securely locked. But when she pressed her face to the window, she saw a

shirtless giant of a man punching a bag suspended in mid-air by thick chains above and below it. He moved with surprising speed and grace, each blow from his fists shaking the bag so hard Hermione wondered if the chains were enough to hold it in place.

I wonder if Ron looks that good with his shirt off?

Hermione blushed at her own thought, trying to shake it off. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about red-haired boys, with or without their shirts.

Where are Harry and his cousin?

She knocked on the window lightly, trying to catch his attention. He saw her, and seemed to sigh and growl at the same time as he stalked across the mats to the front door.

"Your business, girl?"

Hermione was flustered, but collected herself. "I want to see Harry Potter."

Duncan McAllister shook his head. "I don't think so, girl. I don't know you, Dursley hasn't said a word about any girl, and I'm damn well not going to interrupt Gracie for a girl I don't know. Now get!"

He slammed the door in her face. At least he knew who Harry was.

With a sigh, she trudged over to a bench across the street. She needed to think this through.

I've seen enough I can go to the Order. They have to help now.

It still seemed like a waste to have come all this way and not to see him.

And if she were honest with herself, she was scared to go back to the Order. What if they don't listen, because of how I left things?

She shivered despite the sun. After what I did for them...I deserve to be listened to.

That still didn't seem right. There was still the chance that the Order wouldn't help, and there was no guarantee she'd be able to get away a second time.

She remembered the bloody scrap of cloth Crookshanks had found. There's not even a guarantee he's here...or that 'Gracie' – whoever she is – would let him come with me.

She would have to go back to Privet Drive and wait for him, which meant calling another cab.

Wasn't there a café just down the street?

- 0 -

Hermione was waiting for her cab when she saw him.

He walked out of the gym and blinked up at the sun, looking up at it as if he wasn't use to seeing it. As he lifted his face to the sky, she saw bruises on his face and his arms; deep purple and sickly green splotches, like he had been beaten.

He looked tired. There were deep dark circles under his eyes. He had grown taller, and was thinner than she had ever seen him. She could practically count his ribs under the tight black t-shirt. His skin was pale and sickly looking. He seemed resigned, somehow, almost defeated.

But he had changed in other ways. There was something indefinably different about the way he moved, and despite being dangerously thin, she saw more muscle on his frame than she'd ever thought Harry would have.

The gray-haired woman he was with was hovering while trying to act like she wasn't hovering...and he seemed comfortable with her. She was leading him toward a bus.

Maybe she's Gracie?

She blinked the tears from her eyes and was about to dash headlong across the street to get to him.

"Harry!" She screamed his name, wanting to get his attention.

He turned towards her, the ghost of a smile touching his lips; his eyes took her breath away. Raw sorrow, guilt, and pain – it was like looking into the heart of a bright green fire.

- 0 -

When Harry walked outside, he realized it was one of the few times that summer the sun touched his face; it felt wonderful. Better than the shower. He took a deep breath and turned his face to the sky, basking in it, drinking in the brightness and warmth.

"Harry!" He started at the familiar voice.

Hermione?

He almost smiled, but a pang of guilt and longing caught his breath. He scanned the crowd, searching for the familiar bushy brown hair, her infectious smile.

But there was no one there.

Gracie looked down at him. "I swear I heard someone call your name, kid."

Harry nodded slowly. "Yeah, I did too. But it was probably someone else. It's a common name, you know."

He could almost hear his aunt. Nasty, common name, Harry.

She squeezed his shoulder, and felt the familiar flinch, but she didn't pull away. "Come on, kid. I don't want to miss the bus."

- 0 -

Strong hands pulled her back, and she felt a wash of silken cloth brush over her as she was drug into an alley beside the café.

Her hand was grasping her wand even as her foot lashed out, coming down hard on an instep.

“Ow, damn, girl!”

The hands released and she spun away, bringing her wand to bear. But there was no one there.

Invisibility cloak.

Well, she knew how to handle that. “Adumbro cindere!”

Everything in the alley was suddenly outlined by faint blue fire, and she could make out the silhouette of her attacker.

“Stupefy!”

The jet of red light leapt from her wand, but the cloaked figure dodged easily.

Hermione smiled coldly. She’d been in enough duels now to predict that. In fact, she’d been counting on it. Her stance shifted slightly, her wand moving slightly to one side.

“Expelliarmus!”

The cloaked figure flew backwards. Their wand flew into Hermione’s outstretched hand.

Nymphadora Tonks threw off the hood of the invisibility cloak, sputtering.

“Girl, have you even thought about the Reasonable Restriction for Underage Sorcery?”

Hermione sneered, anger welling in her as she recognized the Auror. How can you just...watch him?

"I'd just get a warning. My first offense, and all that. And you grabbed me. From behind. Like an attacker. What did you expect I would do? Go meekly, like Harry has to?"

She advanced on Tonks. "Did you see him?" Hermione poked her wand at Tonks, blue sparks flickering through the air. "Did you?"

Her voice was almost a screech. She pocketed Tonks' wand, and stared venomously at the older woman.

"Yeah, I saw. And I can't do a damn thing about it!" The anguish in Tonks' voice made Hermione waver.

The Auror grabbed her by the shoulders. "And where have you been, Hermione? Everyone's been worried sick, and scared to death! We thought Death Eaters had you!"

Hermione shook Tonks off. "I left a note! Ginny said Harry needed me, and she was right!"

"Maybe she was...but damn it, you scared us!" Tonks sank down to the ground, leaning against the wall. "Why didn't you trust us to help you?"

Hermione stared down at her, trying to force her guilt away. "How could I? When have any of you listened to any of us? McGonagall forbid me to go to him!"

Tonks shook her head. "You didn't even give us a chance!"

"You've never given us a chance! Not once, not ever! Now Sirius is dead, and Harry's been subjected to Merlin knows what this summer! Ginnystill has nightmares, and there are times I'm afraid to leave any of my friends alone because I'm not sure I'll ever see them again! It's why I joined your precious Order! I don't have that many friends, Nymphadora Tonks, and I'll be damned before I'll let you or anyone else just stand there while they're destroyed piece by piece!"

Hermione was crying now, but she didn't care. "When have any of you given us a chance? When have any of you so-called adults bothered to listen to us? How much more do we have to give, to endure, before we're 'allowed' to fight with the 'grown-ups'?"

Tonks stood back up. "This isn't the time or the place for this."

Hermione kept her wand trained on Tonks. "Oh? And where is? Grimmauld Place, where a house-elf even I hate can saunter about and mock us? Or some other dark, dank place where we can sit and rot?"

Tonks shook her head. "Hermione..."

"Fine." She handed Tonks her wand back. "Take me to the Order, then. We'll see what 'trust' gets me."

End Chapter

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Shopping

The bus took Harry and Gracie to Little Whinging's major center of commerce. The Afternoon Market was really nothing more than several strip malls, restaurants and the cinema clustered in one corner of town. The obligatory historical marker said that the Afternoon Market used to only be open late afternoons and odd Saturdays, but as people needed more jobs and wanted to buy more things, the Afternoon Market was soon an all-day, every-day market, but no one felt like changing the name.

Harry had lived in Little Whinging most of his life, but had never been to the Afternoon Market before. In its own way, it was as exotic and fascinating as Diagon Alley. Muggle teenagers were all over the place, dressed in all kinds of strange costumes. Some of the girls left Harry staring rather rudely – not even Parvati or Lavender got away with wearing so few clothes!

He followed Gracie as she perused from shop to shop, not paying too much attention to what she bought. When he noticed that some of it was obviously for him, he tried to get her to stop. She'd already bought him several shirts and pants, and to his extreme embarrassment, several packages of boxers and socks. As with the clothes she'd already given him, it was all black.

I guess she really isn't all that great at fashion, but at least everything matches.

"Gracie, you don't need to..."

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. "No, I don't. But I am anyway. Someone's gotta take care of you, kid, and I'm volunteering for the job."

He wanted to try to talk her out of it, but knew it was hopeless. When I get a chance to get to Gringott's, I'll find a way to send her money for all this stuff.

With that in mind, he kept his silence until she dragged him into an optometrist's shop. He started to protest, but she didn't let him.

"How long have you had those glasses?"

He shrugged. "Ten year or so, I guess. A while."

"Too long. That's bad for your eyes, and probably doesn't help your schoolwork." She looked at him hard. "Don't argue with me about this. I have the money, and more. And your National Health Card works for stuff like this, too."

"I'm sure it does." Harry answered quietly. "But I don't have one. The Dursleys never bothered with it for me."

Gracie's face darkened, and she nodded. Harry tried to remain as unobtrusive as he could while Gracie haggled with the man behind the counter. Eventually, they reached some kind of agreement.

The man from behind the counter took Harry to a back room and ran him through a gamut of vision tests, cumulating with a large metal apparatus with multiple lenses. The process felt awkward and was another reminder to Harry that he had never really been a part of the Muggle world.

"Now, pick out new frames." She gestured around at the selection, and Harry blanched. He had no idea where to even start.

"What do you think would look good?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're hopeless, kid."

He couldn't help but grin. "Yeah, probably."

Gracie helped him pick out a pair of black wire rimless frames, and they agreed to come back in a couple of hours to pick up them up. They walked back into the afternoon sunlight, and Harry watched teenagers around his age laughing and talking with friends, couples holding hands...he saw two guys, one of them with dyed blue hair, teasing a shy girl who gave as good as she got.

There was a hollow ache in his chest as he walked.

“Missing your friends?” Gracie asked softly.

“Yeah.” Harry nodded. “I probably won’t get to see them until September first, when we all catch the train to school at King’s Cross.”

Gracie smiled at him. “I bet they miss you too, kid. You’re really not half bad, you know.” She paused just long enough for a mischievous twinkle to appear in her eyes. “Anyone special?”

“No, not really.” Harry shook his head, remembering his disastrous relationship with Cho Chang. Strangely, his stomach no longer did flip-flops when he thought about the Ravenclaw Seeker – and in fact, it hadn’t since the embarrassing afternoon at Madame Puddifoot’s. “Almost, but it wasn’t meant to be.”

Gracie frowned. “Why not?”

Harry looked up at her with those shadowed eyes, as if considering something. “Honestly?”

“I think I can handle it, kid.”

Harry closed his eyes. He wanted to tell her, but he couldn’t. “I’d rather not get into it. It was messy, and I should have known better than to get involved with her when I did.”

Gracie shrugged. “Fair enough, I suppose. But you can talk to me. I won’t judge, and I won’t send you away.”

Harry could see in her eyes she wanted him to be honest. “I’ll try.”

“Right then,” she said, “what about whoever you thought said your name?” At his surprised look, she grinned. “Oh, come on, kid, I saw your face light up. Who is she? And does she know who she is?”

This time, when Harry laughed, it was honest amusement – the first she'd heard from him all summer.

“Hermione? And me?” He shook his head and grinned widely. “Not hardly. Ron – my best mate – and her, maybe. You should hear how they bicker. Bloody hell, if they don't get it sorted out soon I'm going to lock them in a broom closet somewhere until they do!”

Or I would if Hermione wouldn't hex me into next year...

Gracie laughed with him. “Anyone you got your eye on?”

Harry shook his head, looking down at his feet. “No, no one. It's not really something I think too much about these days.”

...And either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives...

There wouldn't be anyone for a long while – maybe not ever. He sank back into silence.

But Gracie's question had sparked thought; he didn't want anyone like Cho Chang. That kind of drama was best left for guys like Michael Corner. Nor would someone like Hermione suit him; her need to understand and analyze him would make him climb the walls.

So what did he want?

He wanted to be comfortable with someone he was 'with' like that; be able to just sit in silence. They would have to be comfortable with Ron and Hermione too. There was no way he was allowing a possible romance get in the way of his friendships with those two.

They would have to be able to stand up to him; to do what Ron and Hermione did and tell him when he was wrong, and force him to face what he did and didn't do. Hold him accountable. And be honest; not hide things from him for his own 'protection'. He didn't want to have to wade through a quagmire of hints or games to figure out where he stood with someone he was dating.

She would have to want – need – family as much as he did. Someone like Molly & Arthur Weasley, who made you family, willing to adopt the stray kid abandoned at King's Cross without knowing who he was.

Most of all, that person would have to know him as Harry Potter. A person; not a hero, or a savior or a wizard playing a predestined part.

None of this will matter...until the Prophecy is fulfilled it's useless to try. I can't leave someone like that to live on after I die. Ron and Hermione will be bad enough, but they'll have each other. And if I don't die, then I can go out and romance anyone I damn well please.

Gracie saw his face, and she wondered. There was something he wasn't telling her. But like she had said at the beginning of summer...there were some things she wasn't going to ask about.

Like the scar on his hand, where someone had carved the words 'I will not tell lies.'

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They stopped for lunch at an outdoor café and she bought them both sandwiches. While she was ordering, she leaned back over her shoulder, noticing how well black suited him. He was a slender shadow against the bright sky. With his pale face and green eyes and his natural quiet, had the wounded and vulnerable look many would-be Goths spent hours trying to fake.

She smiled, watching him as he looked up at the sun, his face softening as his eyes half-closed. He had grown a lot since she'd first met him, and she was glad to see him finally relaxing a bit.

She saw he'd slipped the glove back on at some point – probably when he'd seen her sneaking glances at his hand. To his credit, he'd tried hard to hide it, but Gracie had been trained to see things others tried to hide.

"Whatcha' want to drink, kid?"

Harry blinked and turned away from the sun. "Whatever you're having."

"No favorites?"

Shaking his head, Harry thrust his hands into his pocket; she watched his fingers move under the fabric touch the strange piece of polished wood he always carried, reassuring himself it was still there.

What the hell is that thing, anyway?

"Not really." He didn't want to tell her he hadn't tried all that many Muggle drinks. The Dursleys had let him have water, occasionally treating him with milk or juice. "Besides," he gave her a crooked half-smile, as if sharing a secret with her, "I don't think you can get pumpkin juice around here."

"Pumpkin juice?" She mouthed silently, and pointed to two bottles of Dr Pepper. "We'll take those."

She paid for lunch, and walked over to a table, where they deposited their purchases. The muscles in Harry's arms relaxed, and he looked down at the dozen plus bags at his feet, realizing just how much she had bought...and that more than half was for him.

Gracie sat down with a groan and a sigh.

"I miss America at times like this...an honest mall would have made this easier."

Harry looked up. "You're from the states?"

"Yeah." Gracie sighed. "From Texas, actually. Haven't been back since I was kid. I finally lost my Texas drawl sometime back during my stint in Scotland Yard."

"Oh." Harry forced himself to take a bite of his sandwich, and washed it down with a swallow of the fizzy dark cola. He blinked in surprise. "This is good."

Gracie grinned. "My father had a saying: nothing can't be made better with Dr Pepper and chocolate. Since I'm allergic to the latter, I stick to the former."

"You're allergic to chocolate?" Harry stared at her in abject horror. Merlin, if someone sends Dementors this summer...

"What?" She asked. "It's not like it's a matter of life and death, kid." She took a long pull from her drink and sighed in satisfaction. "So, where are you from?"

Harry looked at her blankly, as if he had never really considered the question. "I was born in Godric's Hollow...but my parents died when I was a baby. My Aunt and Uncle took me in...they had to, I think." His voice had grown a little distant, and he had set his food down, but was toying with the condensation on his soda. He took another swallow.

"I grew up in Little Whinging, with my cousin. But I've spent the last five years away at school, except the summers."

Gracie polished off both her sandwich and soda, forcing herself not to push too hard. It was hard. She wanted to ask him so many things. About who in his family was beating him. How much he got to eat. And some pointed questions about where he really went to school. But she knew better; she knew if she pushed things, he'd clam up and run away.

But damn it all, I like this kid. If I can get him to open up, I can get him out of there. Maybe while he's in school I can get a few of my friends from the Yard to look in on those relatives of his...

He'd said he went back to school on September first. That gave her a little over a month to work on him, ferret out what she needed to know to get him removed from his relatives' custody. Still, there were some things she could do in the meantime. Watching how he ate slowly, savoring every bite, not wasting a crumb confirmed her suspicions about how well he was eating.

Gonna have to start bringing lunch for the two of us. I haven't been in the habit of eating lunch since I was a rookie, but a teenage boy needs a lot more food than an old woman.

At least he was finally talking to her, at least a little.

"So, where's school, kid?"

Harry looked up and met her gaze steadily. "St Brutus' Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys."

Gracie snorted. "I told you before, you're not much of a liar. No such place exists, kid, and I would know."

He took a small bite of his sandwich, but didn't say anything.

"Let me guess." She leaned back in her chair with a sigh. "That's your story, and you're sticking to it."

He shrugged self-consciously. "Fraid so."

"Hmph. One of these days, I'm going to figure out your damn mystery, kid, and then, we'll just see."

Harry didn't blink. He just looked at her. "Please don't. I don't want you to get hurt."

Or lose you to an Obliviator.

Gracie stretched, her back popping. "Kid, I'm the most tenacious, stubborn old woman you're ever going to meet. I've taken a liking to you; you don't make a big deal out of having the crap kicked out of you every night by your family, and you don't whimper at me when I make you work hard. You're brave and strong, and I get the feeling you're gonna be brave and strong until it kills you."

The boy actually chuckled. "People tell me that a lot. And you're all probably right. But it's the way things are, for now."

Her voice softened. "I'm also damn patient. I can wait until you're ready."

He looked down at his hands and whispered. "Thank you. For everything...and I wish I could tell you. I want to, so much. To tell you everything. You're the only one I think might be willing to listen and understand. But I can't."

She could hear the desperation in his voice. He really did want to tell her, and really felt he couldn't.

Sensei would be proud of me right now...not only taking a student, but taking care of him the way he did me.

Gracie put her hand over his; she hid her own wince as he flinched.

I wish he would stop doing that. But she knew he wouldn't. It was pretty typical for an abused kid to react that way to physical touch.

"Kid, no matter what, I'm here, all right? 'Cause someone has to be. Trust me, if you need me, I'm there. Just call me. My number's in the backpack – outside pocket, with a prepaid calling card. Anytime. You got that?"

Harry looked up in shock, blinking away sudden tears. "You don't have to..."

Gracie shook her head. "No, I don't. And I mean it. Call me anytime, day or night. If you need money for school, someone to talk to, an adult to sign a form, or just a shoulder to cry on. Anything. Now, come on. Eat."

Harry dutifully took another bite of the sandwich.

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After lunch, she insisted on buying him a new pair of boots to replace his worn trainers.

He couldn't argue with her reasoning. "Boots last longer, hold up under wear and tear better."

I will pay her back, every pound, as soon as I can. He didn't want her to buy him anything else. He didn't like accepting charity, and it chafed at him that he knew he had the money to pay her back, and more, but couldn't get to it.

He drew the line when she tried to buy him a new watch and wallet.

"No, Gracie. I can't accept any more. I'll be fine without a watch, and I've never needed a wallet. Nothing to put in it, anyway." He saw her set her jaw determinedly and sighed. "I appreciate it all, I really do. It'll be hard enough just getting what you've given me past the Dursleys."

"All right, kid, all right," she relented. "But there's a couple of other things I'm gonna give you later that I won't let you say no to. One of 'em, you'll need later today, and there's one other thing I'm gonna buy for you today. Okay?"

"Deal," Harry said. "Just one more thing, though. I've got as much as I can carry, anyway."

When they left the store, Gracie looked at her watch. "We've got just enough time to take you to get a haircut and get a proper shave. Whoever taught you didn't do a very good job."

Harry looked down, ashamed. "No one taught me. Today was the first I've ever tried. I just did the best I could."

She took his chin into her hand, wishing for the millionth time he didn't flinch when she touched him. "Not bad, then. But I think I'll have to make sure you learn properly, otherwise you'll slit your own throat." She dropped her hand. "Come on, then. I know just the place."

She took him to an old fashioned barber shop hidden away behind a pub, and greeted the proprietor by name and with a hug. The stout, balding man grinned at Gracie and slapped her back hard.

“Gracie, old girl, you should stop by more!” He pulled away from her and looked down at Harry, before thrusting out his hand. “Ken Morrison.”

Harry shook his hand firmly. “Harry Potter.”

“Right then.” He gave Harry a cursory once over. “I’m wagering you brought the boy in for a haircut?”

Gracie nodded. “And I was hoping you’d help me teach the boy to shave. I figure between the two of us we can help him get it right.”

He snorted. “Woman, I have been shaving this face for as long as you’ve been alive! What makes you think I’d need help teaching a boy how to perform a man’s most delicate art?”

Gracie held up her hands in amused surrender. “Fine, fine, I’ll leave you to it.” She wandered over to the waiting area and picked up one of the outdated magazines.

Ken stroked his graying blonde moustache. “You want to learn the easy way, or the right way?”

Harry was definitely confused now. What kind of question was that? “Sir?”

Ken pointed at a barber’s chair positioned in front of a mirror and what looked like a dresser with a built in sink. “Sit.”

Harry complied, awkward and nervous all over again.

“There are two or three ways to shave. Electric razors cost a pretty penny, at least if you want a good one, and usually do a piss poor job. Safety razors are cheap and easy to replace and do a decent enough job. But a good old fashioned straight razor is something you can buy once and keep for years if you take good care of it, and will give you the closest shave you can have.”

Ken pulled out an assortment of things that wouldn’t have looked out of place in Snape’s potions dungeons. “Shaving cream is damn

useful, and'll keep you from scraping your face off. There are a couple of options. Aerosol spray foam works just as well as a bowl and brush, but lasts a tenth as long. A bowl and brush, like a straight razor, are an investment in proper grooming. You just need to replace the shaving soap itself when it runs out."

Harry's nervousness grew as the Ken ran hot water into a steel basin and flipped open a straight razor, running across a leather strop. "I'm gonna give you a proper shave, but I'll show you how to use any of the options I've talked about."

Swallowing hard, Harry looked back at Gracie, who just shrugged. "Don't look at me. It's a guy thing."

Harry thought fast. The electric razor sounded like the least dangerous option, but Hogwarts didn't exactly have electricity. He had no idea how he would go about replacing aerosol shaving cream or safety razors at Hogwarts, which left what Harry was sure was the most dangerous option.

Great. Now I can kill myself shaving, too.

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Gracie was still laughing at him when they got back to the gym.

"I thought your eyes were gonna bug out of your head when Ken tilted your head back and came at you with that razor!"

Harry just sighed, and adjusted his new glasses. The new prescription was better than his old, but he wasn't used to them yet.

I am so glad Ron wasn't there. Or the twins. I'd never hear the end of it.

She patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about, kid. You made Ken a happy man today, going with the 'proper kit for a young man'."

The aging barber certainly had been pleased when Harry had let Gracie buy him a straight razor, strop, wood bowl, brush, extra soap,

polish and whetstone, and a leather case for the whole lot, but he winced every time he thought of the price. He'd been even more surprised when Ken had thrown a small sewing kit, comb, brush, and fingernail kit into the case, followed by what looked to be a very fancy toothbrush and tube of toothpaste.

"Everything a young man needs to stay well groomed!" Ken had said. "It's not every day someone your age buys the proper kit, and I'll be good and damned if I'll let you walk out of my shop with it incomplete!"

Harry had just sighed and thanked them both.

I'm sure the Gringotts goblins have a way to send money to the Muggle world. Or Dumbledore will know.

"I guess you got away with buying me more than one thing," Harry said.

"Nope!" Gracie said cheerfully. "A toiletry kit is just one thing!"

Harry rolled his eyes, uncomfortable with how much Gracie had bought for him, but not sure telling her would be the best way to show his gratitude.

They walked around behind the gym, where Harry saw a large motorcycle tucked into a corner near the rear exit.

"My baby." Gracie patted it with proprietary pride. "Let's get loaded and out to my place."

Harry had no idea how she did it without magic, but she managed to fit everything they'd bought into the saddlebags and storage on the bike. She produced a pair of helmets and a pair of leather jackets. The one she slid on was bulky and black with polished silver studs and looked well-worn. The other she threw to him.

He caught it, surprised at how soft and supple the leather was. The jacket was far more streamlined than the one she threw to him, but was cut in a similar style and had a multitude of discreet pockets. The

leather was a muted silvery blue, and when he looked at it closely, he could see patterns of what looked like tiny scales. When the fading sunlight hit it, it seemed to ripple and shimmer iridescently.

It feels like dragonhide...but why would Gracie have a dragonhide jacket?

"I know it's hot, but you want to wear the jacket. It'll protect you from flying road debris and the wind."

"Thanks," he said, pulling it on. Unlike what he expected, the jacket wasn't hot at all. The leather seemed to breathe well, a lot like his glove.

"An old friend of mine, a crazy hippy named Wulfric, wore that when he went riding with me. He left it with me when he went off on some kind of walkabout fifteen or sixteen years ago. I haven't seen him since, so I reckon there's no harm in your having it."

Harry nodded, muttered his thanks, and fastened it up like she had done hers. After she'd helped him adjust the helmet, he awkwardly climbed onto the small back seat.

"Arms around me. Hold on tight."

Harry barely had time to grab hold of her before she peeled out of the back parking lot.

End Chapter

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Voices in the Dark

To Gracie's surprise, Harry helped her cook dinner.

"Least I can do, after everything you've done for me."

Dinner was simple fare, just fish and chips, but Harry was surprised at how hungry he was.

Gracie looked at him eat, and grinned. "Glad to see you finally have an appetite, kid. You're doing a damn good job with your training this summer, and I'd hate to see you drop dead of starvation on me."

Harry paused, and looked up at her. "Why are you teaching me?"

The woman leaned back in her chair and took a long swallow of her beer.

"Because I want to." She set her beer down. "Because my teacher did the same for me."

She'd been expecting the question all summer, and until right then she hadn't been sure how she was going to answer it.

He took a few more bites. "Did you teach Duncan too?"

"No." Gracie shook her head. "You are my first and only student. I'm damn proud of you, too."

Harry flushed, and looked down at his nearly empty plate. "Why haven't you taught anyone else?"

Gracie thought about not answering, but decided he deserved to know.

Maybe if I open up a little, he will too.

“You remember when I first offered to teach you, I said that I had a debt to pay?”

He nodded, finishing off the last of his meal.

“I retired from the Yard a few years ago. After I retired, I stayed with my Sensei – my teacher, a man named Tal Shan. He runs a dojo in London. I didn’t want to teach, so he asked me to leave.”

She could still remember his stern, calm voice. “Leave and do not come back. I spent much of my life to teaching you even when I knew you were not worthy. I helped you become worthy of what you learn. You dishonor and disrespect all I have done for you.”

But how could she teach arrogant children who wanted to learn to be movie stars? How could she educate the next generation of bullies, of street thugs, in what she knew?

“You expect too much of a student,” Tal Shan had said, “if you expect them to come to you with their minds and spirits prepared for what you will offer.”

She finished off her beer, shaking her head clear of the memory. “I didn’t understand why I was supposed to teach until that morning you had that flashback.”

Harry picked up their plates and silverware, taking them over to the sink. “So what’s the debt?”

Gracie threw her bottle away, and debated getting a second. “I owe it to Tal Shan to teach you the same way he taught me. I give honor and respect to what he did for me by doing the same for you. He was right to ask me to leave.”

She seemed to almost be talking to herself as she pulled a cold Dr Pepper from her fridge as Harry washed the dishes. She would offer to help, but she got the feeling he wouldn’t let her. “I couldn’t teach until I wanted to.”

Harry smiled hesitantly. “You’re a very good teacher, Gracie.”

She drained half the bottle of soda. Maybe she should have gone for that second beer after all. "Thanks, kid."

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After dinner, Gracie took him on a walk around the neighborhood.

He was surprised when he saw her reach into her pocket and pull out a package of cigarettes. She flipped one out, tucked in between her lips and lit it with a match.

She smiled wryly at him. "Yeah, I know. Bad habit. But I usually only smoke one or two after dinner when I go walking. I tried to quit when I retired, but I never quite got there."

Harry thrust his hands into his pockets and nodded. He breathed in the cool night air, tinged with the smoke of Gracie cigarette, and enjoyed his relative freedom.

He didn't feel the prickling on the back of his neck he usually did when he was at Privet Drive and knew none of the Order – or anyone else - was there watching him.

It felt good.

Just one night. One night where I can rest, not get hit and really eat. Maybe I'll even get some breakfast in the morning. He smiled at the thought, but decided he wouldn't ask for it. He didn't want to stretch Gracie's hospitality. Just one night, and I can go back and face the Dursleys.

"So, what do you want to be when you grow up, kid?"

Harry looked up, surprised at the question. "What do you mean?"

Gracie grinned. "What does a self-respecting graduate of St Brutus' Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys do when he graduates?"

"I dunno. Law enforcement?" Harry couldn't resist the weak joke, especially since he wanted to be an Auror.

Gracie chuckled. "You know, kid, there is no such place."

Harry nodded. "I didn't figure there was, really."

"Still not gonna tell me where you really go?" Her voice was gentle.

"No. I can't. I want to, but I can't." He shrugged. "I don't think you'd believe me, anyway."

"You'd be surprised what I'd believe, but I'll let it go. I'll find out someday. But I'm honestly curious. What do you want to do with your life? Not just career, but in general?"

Harry couldn't help but think of the Prophecy. He smiled weakly. "Law enforcement. Where I go to school, there's a kind of, detective, I suppose, that tracks down some very nasty and unpleasant people. I want to be one of them."

Gracie could tell he was carefully avoiding any names or titles, but she let it be. Besides, something about what he was saying gave her that nagging feeling she had forgotten something.

"I was Special Investigations," she said. "We tracked the worst of the worst. Rapists, child molesters, and the weird stuff. Cults, serial killers, that sort of thing. I was good at it."

"Why'd you retire?" Harry asked, scuffing his feet along the pavement.

"I lost my perspective. Got close to becoming the kind of person I was after." Her voice was tight, and she sucked hard on her cigarette.

"A friend of mine keeps telling me I'm a good judge of people, and I don't think you could ever have become a monster." Harry spoke quietly, unsure of himself, but he felt like he had to say it.

"Thanks, kid."

“What was it like, doing that? Actually fighting the bad guys?”

Gracie shrugged. “Moments of intense violence and being afraid you or someone else was going to die punctuated by lots of paperwork and boring meetings. A lot of the times we couldn’t do what we needed to do because of some stupid law or another, or because someone was rich enough to buy their way out of the system. Or someone didn’t believe us. It was worth it, in the end, but sometimes, I hated who I worked for as much as I hated the people I was after. The hardest part of my job was following orders, especially when I knew they were wrong.”

They kept walking, and Harry kept thinking. He thought about what it would be like to be an Auror, and wondered if he would actually be any good at it. I’ve never been good at following orders. I want to be able to do the right thing when it needs to be done, not waiting for someone else to tell me I can.

But hadn’t he disobeyed his orders from Dumbledore and gotten Sirius killed?

Sirius died as much because no one told me anything as much as my not doing what I was told. It had taken him most of the summer to realize that and let go of some of his guilt over Sirius’ death, but it just made him angrier at the Order and Dumbledore for not trusting him.

Lack of trust. And when it came right down to it, Harry didn’t trust the Ministry. If I were an Auror, I’d have to work for them. And I don’t think I can do that. I don’t think I can work for what I don’t trust. And even if I don’t become an Auror, I’ll have to fight Voldemort. I can’t let that battle be interfered with by the Ministry. I just can’t.

There had to be a way to fight Voldemort and not be an Auror. He could be a member of the Order of the Phoenix, if they ever let him. But would that be enough?

When he got back to the wizarding world, he would talk to Hermione. She’d be able to help him find something to become that would let him fight without being tied to the Ministry.

It was a strange relief, letting go of his dream of being an Auror. He knew Professor McGonagall would be disappointed, but he had to stick with what he believed in. And he didn't believe in the Ministry.

And what happens after I kill Voldemort? What if I don't want to keep fighting? Even if I do, they wouldn't be able to turn me down after defeating the Dark Lord. No matter what my Potions grade is.

He brightened at that thought, grinning. He wouldn't have to take Potions anymore, if he weren't going to be an Auror! No more Snape!

"I like that grin, kid. What's it for?"

"I just figured out how to get out of taking...erm, chemistry, with a teacher who hates me just because I look like my father. He's always marking me down or ruining my...experiments...because of it. I don't have to take it to graduate, and I just figured out how to get out of it."

"Good for you, kid. Stay away from folks like that. Those that can't let go of the past and punish others for what someone else did to 'em, especially a kid they're supposed to take care of aren't worth the shit I scrape off my boot."

Harry smiled wider, finding it odd Gracie was the first adult to tell him that about Snape – but he had a question. "Thanks. Gracie, there's a word lots of people bandy around. 'Warrior'. Someone even called me that once. What does it mean?"

Gracie looked thoughtful as she flicked her cigarette butt into a trash can. She lit a second one.

"It's not a concept that's easy to define, but I'll try. A warrior is more than a fighter or a soldier, because they fight for more than a cause, more than passion. A warrior is someone who chooses when and how and why to fight. They do what's right, what needs doing, without complaint or want for glory. A warrior thinks before they act, but acts without hesitation. They love and live without fear. Oh, don't get me wrong, kid, a warrior can be afraid. But they don't let fear rule them. They don't give in to fear. They hold the line, no matter what."

Harry nodded. "I like the sound of that."

"Thought you might," Gracie said. "But you have to be careful. Being a warrior isn't easy and it's not something that always makes sense. And there are times you have to be a person first and a warrior second."

Harry nodded again. He thought he understood that.

"All right, my little warrior," Gracie said fondly, "let's get back so we can get a bit of practice in before bed."

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When they got back, they sorted out the packages.

There was more for Gracie than Harry had thought when they were shopping, but there was quite a bit for him, too. Several pairs of black cargo pants and jeans, lots of plain black t-shirts, training pants, black silk boxers and half dozen packages of white socks. She'd bought him short and long sleeved black button-up shirts, several of which had various oriental designs such as dragons or kanji on them. The black boots, which were made of sturdy leather and two belts.

There was also the shaving kit, a key ring (not that he needed one), and a package of handkerchiefs. She'd also included several small bottles of shampoo, travel-size bars of soap, washcloths and a pair of towels. He was also surprised to see quite a few muggle school supplies: several of the large five-subject notebooks, pens, pencils, a pencil pouch, tape, a stapler, and plenty of plain folders.

"For someone who goes to a boarding school, that's about half of what you'd really need, but it's the best you'd let me get away with." Gracie sounded frustrated by his reluctance to let her buy anything for him, but she was trying to accept it with good grace.

She brought out a large black duffel bag that, to his surprise, had a bright red and gold phoenix on the side.

“I’ve got about a half-dozen of these. Back about twenty years ago, when I was a lot less cynical and was planning on teaching when I got out of the Yard, my teacher had a few of these made for me.” The look on her face was torn between wistful nostalgia and guilt.

“Why a phoenix?” Harry asked hesitantly. He wasn’t sure he wanted to find out if she had a connection to the Order. But that jacket had felt an awful lot like dragonhide. “I saw your tattoo...”

She grinned. “Before Wulfric ran off to ‘find himself again’, he and I hung out a lot. Nothing romantic, if that’s what you’re thinking, just a good friend. He had this thing about phoenixes. Was fascinated by them. He was fascinated by a lot of mythical creatures, but the phoenix most of all.” Gracie shrugged. “Symbols are the thing in martial arts. Lots of the forms are named after animals because they mimic some of their movements. I kinda got attached to the phoenix as a symbol, I guess. It was gonna be the symbol for the school I was gonna start. I got the tattoo after Wulfric left, because I knew I would probably never see him again. When guys like him wander off, they don’t usually come back.”

“Oh,” Harry said, relieved. I’m getting as paranoid as Moody. Not everything is connected to the wizarding world. Some people really are just muggles.

But there was something about the name ‘Wulfric’ that was tugging at the back of his mind.

They packed everything into the duffel and stowed it with the backpack by the couch – which was pretty much the only thing in her living area.

“Now sit,” she said, pointing to the floor in front of the couch. She walked into her bedroom and came back carrying a bundle of cloth.

When she came out, she was dressed differently than he’d seen her before, wearing a full gi. It was all black, as was her belt. There was a phoenix patch on the right shoulder.

She sat down in front of him, and set the cloth down between them. She also set out ten candles in two circles of five.

“Most martial arts have a uniform,” she said. “though it’s not necessary to have a uniform in order to train. I’ve taught you mostly Chinese-style forms and a lot of street self-defense, but my teacher and I always preferred the Japanese gi for training and tournament.”

She held up what looked to be a heavy black canvas jacket; on the back was the same stylized red and gold phoenix from the duffel bag. There was a matching patch sewn onto the right shoulder. “I had this made up for you earlier this summer.” She held up the black pants, which had white kanji on the lower legs. Then she folded both carefully and set them back down. Last was a white belt, made from the same heavy canvas, though it looked far more worn than the rest. “Normally in martial arts, the color of the belt you wear is your rank as a martial artist. My teacher told me the truth of it though. There are only two ranks that matter: white belt, or student, and black belt, or master. You’re still a student.”

Harry nodded, getting the feeling this was some kind of ceremony.

“These are my gift to you as my student. The belt was once mine. As my teacher passed it to me, I pass it to you.”

Harry gave a small bow. “Thank you.”

“Don’t wear this for day-to-day practice, only when I tell you to. It’s not for every occasion, but there will be times to wear it. This uniform, like so much else in martial arts, means something.

“When you wear this uniform, it means you represent something. You represent me, who you know and have learned from. You represent Tal Shan, my teacher, whom you do not know and have never met. You represent every student who has learned from him or who might learn from me. You represent his teachers, his training – you represent the lineage of our art and our form. Martial arts extends past fighting and into every aspect of your life. How you act and interact with others, how you organize and prioritize your life. What you do and don’t do. By accepting this uniform, you accept that

responsibility. You accept that you are part of a tradition going back hundreds of years.”

Harry nodded quietly. “I think I understand, or at least I will once I have the time to think it all through. But what, exactly, am I supposed to represent?”

Gracie gave him an exasperated look. “Why is it you answer all these questions better than I ever did?”

Harry shrugged. “I have my moments, I guess.”

“That you do, kid, that you do. As for what you represent – well, going back to our discussion about being a warrior. Everything I described was a virtue – which implies morality. There is the morality of deed,” she lit a match and started lighting candles, one at a time. “Which is composed of humility, loyalty, respect, righteousness and trust. All are hard in their own way, complex and layered. You’ll find that out for yourself. Then there is the morality of the mind. Courage, endurance, patience, perseverance and will.” She lit one candle for each virtue.

“Stick to these, meditate on them, contemplate them and live them and you will honor your uniform, your style, your teacher and yourself.” She picked up the uniform, laying it across her arms. She held it out to him. “Knowing what is expected of you, knowing what it means, do you accept your uniform and your place in our school?”

Harry bowed and took the uniform from her.

She spent the next ten minutes showing him how to wear it, how to tie the gi and belt, and a little of how to move in it. The uniform fit well – and felt wonderful, as if by wearing it he was transformed from being Harry Potter into someone entirely different. Someone worthy of respect.

Harry was very careful when he put the gi in his duffel bag.

True to her word, Gracie had Harry work through the tai'chi form while she watched. She turned off the lights.

“Close your eyes. Working the form without being able to see is harder – it takes more concentration, but it also removes distraction.”

Harry started by just standing and breathing. He closed his eyes and let the sensation of breathing wash over him. He felt himself falling away from himself into the void, but this time it came without him consciously calling it.

He barely noticed it when he began to move; the motions were slow, each bleeding into the next. His body moved with barely a conscious command.

There was just enough light coming in through the windows for Gracie to watch.

I've never seen anyone catch on so fast. I don't know how he does it. This level of skill shouldn't be possible for the short time we've been training.

She just shook her head in amazement and wondered if Harry would spoil her for any other student she trained.

Then Gracie got her first glimpse at who Harry Potter was.

When it first started, she thought she was imagining things. Faint flickers of eldritch green light seemed to play across his body as he moved, leaving the faintest tracers hanging in the air.

It didn't take her long to realize she wasn't imagining it. The farther in the form he got, the more pronounced the effect became. The light became brighter and seemed to hang in the air as if it had a tangible presence all its own.

Holy shit.

Gracie swallowed hard. She'd never seen anything like it before. She'd never even dreamed such a thing was possible. She just stood there and stared at her student as he moved to the end of the form.

"Keep going." Her voice was a harsh rasp.

Harry finished the form and started over, moving even slower than before; the light grew slightly brighter but then seemed to level off. She could feel the air crackle with it, like static electricity trying to become lightning.

Something about it tugged at her memory the way his wooden stick had the first time she'd seen it, but the thought or memory flitted away before she could grasp it.

The second time he finished the form, she shook her head. "That's enough for tonight...that was damn good, kid. Damn good."

He stopped moving and the light faded away.

She didn't mention the light. She didn't want to tell him; she didn't want him thinking she was crazy. Or worse – that she wasn't. She was worried he might actually have an explanation.

"Meditate before you sleep. Focus on your energy and your breath...you're making a lot of progress here." She turned back on the lights, and forced herself to smile.

"Thanks," he said, running a hand through his hair, embarrassed at her praise.

"Grab a shower. I'll get you set up for bed. Bathroom's over there." She pointed to a door next to her bedroom, and watched him gather his clothes. Once she heard the water start running, she sat on her couch and let out a long breath.

What the hell was that?

She could feel the energy seeming to drain out of the air, as if without Harry to maintain it, it was fading away.

She'd never seen or felt anything like that. It was completely outside her experience.

It was like something from one of my old cases, but real. Real power of some kind... She was almost thinking she'd seen real power before, back during all the killings through the seventies...

She brutally shoved the thought out of her head. She would have to do something she wasn't ready to do – she would have to talk to her old teacher. He was the only one she knew who might understand what she'd seen.

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Gracie had blankets and pillows for him on her couch, looking a bit embarrassed she couldn't offer him more. She didn't say anything when he made sure there was a trash bin next to the couch or when he slipped his stick under the pillow.

"It's wonderful, thank you." Harry reassured her as he laid down, dressed for bed in a pair of his training pants.

Gracie awkwardly tucked him in, two fingers brushing the hair away from his scar. Harry had Ken leave his bangs long enough to cover it.

"Sleep well, kid. I'll see you in the morning."

She padded quietly into her bedroom, leaving the door slightly ajar – silently letting him know she was there if he needed her.

I wonder if the kid knows now that I have him away from his relatives that I don't plan on letting him go back?

She figured he didn't. He would never expect someone to do something like that for him. He seems to expect mistreatment as a matter of course.

Gracie went to bed wondering just when Harry Potter had become so important to her.

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Harry tried to meditate, but he could his mind still spun with a thousand thoughts he couldn't get to still. How was he going to explain everything Gracie had bought him to the Dursleys? He still didn't even understand why Gracie was taking care of him like she was. He was worried he was going to miss a letter from Ginny or that the Dursleys would damage his wizarding things.

And a part of him wondered if this is how it would have been living with Sirius. It would have been better, because I wouldn't have to keep secrets from Sirius.

Now he would never have that chance. The grief and guilt and loss seemed to go beyond emotion and become nearly physical pain. It went so deep not a single part of him didn't feel it.

I'm sorry. He didn't really know what he was apologizing for or who he was apologizing to.

He laid there in the darkness, and he remembered. The last five years became a blur: Hagrid buying him Hedwig on his 11th birthday; meeting Ron and Hermione on the train.

He smiled as he realized he had technically known Ginny longer than any of them. She and Molly Weasley were the first people to ever smile at him and send good wishes his way.

To them, he hadn't been 'that boy' or 'the Boy That Lived'. He had simply been a lonely, scared boy who needed them.

Two years later she had been lying at his side as he stabbed the Diary with a Basilisk fang that had pierced his arm. She had been unconscious at the time, lost in Tom Riddle's mind, lost to the wizard who would become Lord Voldemort.

She knows his mind like I do. Maybe better than I do.

Why did these thoughts only come to him like this? She had been there from the beginning, too...but somehow, he never seemed to see her. Or think of her.

Something else to feel guilty about.

He remembered Hermione walking with him and feeding him toast fourth year, after he'd become a Triwizard Champion; then later, despite how he treated her, helping him with the DA.

It had been Ginny to suggest the name 'Dumbledore's Army'. If only she knew how much trouble she'd gotten the Headmaster in...but if she hadn't, would he have been able to rescue them at the Ministry? And she would have loved to know she'd helped Dumbledore prank the entire Ministry of Magic.

Funny...she was the one who convinced me to let her, Luna and Neville come with us.

He shook his head, sympathizing with Dean Thomas. He had certainly picked a girl with spirit.

His eyes burned and his throat was closed around a large lump. It was as if it were his soul hurting, not his body.

Eventually, he slept.

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"Harry Potter."

He knew that voice. He'd heard it for the first time his first year at Hogwarts.

He looked up, and saw he was looking at a mirror. Instead of his face, he saw the snake-like visage of the Dark Lord. Fierce green eyes met glowing red.

His scar burned with more pain than ever. Not even when Voldemort had possessed him at the Ministry had it hurt so much.

“Tom Riddle.”

The Dark Lord bowed his head slightly. “That name no longer has any meaning for me.”

Harry shrugged. “Then you won’t mind me using it.”

Voldemort smiled. “Your pain called so sweetly to me, Harry. What can I do to ease the loneliness? Would it hurt less if I killed one of them?”

Faces flashed past: Ron, Hermione, Luna, Neville, Remus, Molly, Arthur, Fred, George, Tonks, Ginny...

“No!” He swallowed back the rest of his scream, his words echoing in his thoughts. “Not her!”

Not her? Where had that come from?

“Yes, her.” That hated voice hissed. “You came for her once. Would you again?” Voldemort laughed. “Why should I even ask? Of course you would. That’s why you will fail. It is why you are alone...because as long as you live I will...hound...them.”

Harry’s anger surged and he felt his power surge with it. But Gracie’s voice, laced with disapproval filtered through.

“Anger is defeated self.”

He forced the anger away. Forced himself to let go of it. He wouldn’t give Voldemort another weapon against him.

“Why bring them into this, Tom? This is between us. I think you know that.”

“I do. There are, after all, other ways of discerning prophecy. This one is especially troubling, because it appears I chose my opposite number – I marked you. I still seek the final words...would you care to share them?”

Harry didn't answer.

"I didn't think so. Fascinating, what is between us Harry Potter. Both orphans. My Muggle father, your Mudblood Mother. Both who saved us...gave us life with their death."

Harry shook his head. "We're different. I chose to be what I am and you chose to be what you are. Our choices separate us. They always have and always will."

Voldemort's high, cold laugh filled the dream. "You are the weaker for it, Harry. You are alone...I am surrounded by the faithful. Even Severus..."

Harry's mouth twisted into a sneer that was almost the mirror of Snape's. Yes, Harry wanted to tell him, tell me of Severus. Hand me his weaknesses as he handed you mine...

Dumbledore trusted Snape, but Harry didn't. He trusted Snape worked for the Order, and was loyal to Dumbledore...but Snape would never hesitate to hurt or cripple Harry.

"What about my dear and beloved potions master? Did he grovel enough to return to your service?"

Voldemort's smile was patronizingly indulgent. "I love the hatred you share...it is like a fine, aged wine. No...I have seen Severus' mind. I know he spent years searching for the potion that might restore me...and I reward such loyalty. He will never speak of it to me, because he failed, and could not bear the shame...as any loyal servant should, when they fail. I also saw how he...weakened you for me."

Harry said nothing.

"Do you want to wake up, Harry? If you wake up, there will be pain. You will be alone." He paused and smiled. "But if you sleep...I will be here. We can talk, and you can learn of me. Learn of your enemy,

Harry Potter. Unlike Albus Dumbledore, I will answer any question you ask. Have I not already, by telling you the truth about Severus?"

For a moment, he faltered. Here, right then, he could find the answers no one else would give him.

From his arch-enemy.

The irony was not lost on him.

Harry stepped away, already feeling the pain. His body twisted and writhed; he felt the whimper in his throat.

Voldemort held up his wand. Harry couldn't move; his lips were sealed shut.

There was no air to breathe.

There was no way to focus.

"Legilimens!"

The force of it made him scream; his scar felt as if it were going to explode; the pain wracked his body.

Focus.

He and Gracie sparred in the gym, touching and springing apart in a deadly dervish dance, a test of control, of trust.

Control.

Slow. Power and speed are enemies in training. Each movement leading into the other.

Focus and Control.

Voldemort searched for the words Sybill Trelawney had spoken, but all he saw was Sirius falling into the veil. Slow grace.

Slow motion agony.

“Protego!” Harry screamed it, his throat raw.

Flicker.

A boy, staring out a window at falling snow. Turning back to an empty room...Christmas at Hogwarts.

A man stood in the door, quiet. Long hair and beard, half moon spectacles.

“We missed you at dinner, Tom. You are always welcome, you know.”

The boy shrugged. “I’m not good with people, Professor. I’m sorry.”

Albus Dumbledore smiled. “It’s quite all right, I assure you. But if you’d like, I can join you for a bit while you eat.”

With a gesture, a table appeared, laden with Christmas delicacies.

The boy’s eyes lit up. “Please.”

Dumbledore made a gesture behind his back. “Would you also like my company while you open your presents? All of your teachers got you something.”

Tears stung the boy’s eyes. “Really?”

“I promise, Tom.” Dumbledore smiled and sat down with the boy to eat Christmas dinner.

Flicker.

Pain. His scar burning.

“Crucio!”

His entire body clenched. Muscles tensed and twitched; his very marrow was on fire as agony ripped through him.

He screamed again...and he was screaming...

“Harry! Harry! Wake up!” Gracie was shaking him.

He rolled off the couch, heaving. He vomited his dinner into the rubbish bin, Gracie rubbing his back.

“You okay, kid?”

Harry shook his head. “Not really. I will be, though.”

She dabbed a tissue on his scar, where it had broken open and was oozing blood.

“Wait here.” She stood, taking the reeking bin with her.

Harry leaned back against the couch, his body aching as if Voldemort really had cast the Cruciatus Curse on him. He sucked in air, trying to ease the throbbing around his ribs.

Gracie came back with a cup of water and a first aid kit. Gently, she cleaned out the scar with an alcohol swab.

“There.” She sat down next to him and put her arm around him. Surprising them both, he leaned against her.

“It was just a nightmare.”

Gracie shook her head at him. “There’s no such thing as ‘just a nightmare’, kid.”

End Chapter

CHAPTER NINETEEN

From the Inside

She had wanted to dream of Harry.

The Order remained stonily silent about what they knew, and day by day, Ginny was more and more convinced they knew what was going on. She had wanted to dream of him because she might see how he was really doing. His last letter had shaken her, leaving her convinced things were worse for him than she'd imagined. Scared that he was losing hope.

She was afraid she was starting to lose hope.

Part of her had hoped the Ministry might have scared the Dursleys into behaving, but the tone of his letter had shown her it was a false hope. Her only chance was to dream of him.

So she had gone to bed early, but before sleep came, she took hold of her own thoughts and opened her mind, peeling away layer upon layer of mental defenses. Occlumency wasn't so much shields around the mind, though that was as close a metaphor as many people could grasp. It was a way of thinking, a method of controlling, organizing and mastering thought.

She'd become rather adept at the art and it had been a long time since she'd had to consciously clear her mind. But that night, for the first time in four years, she shed her protections, and reached down the paths in her thoughts that lead outside herself.

Ironically, it had been Tom Riddle who had first taught her how to do this. She reached outside herself, towards Harry.

Then she had slept.

She had dreamed of Harry.

She had dreamed of mirrors and distorted faces and hissing voices. She had dreamed of whispered threats and disturbing promises and finally she had dreamed of pain.

Now, she was curled into a corner of her bed, her body aching with an echo of pain that wasn't hers. Her clothes were soaked in sweat, but she felt cold to her bones. If she closed her eyes, she could still see Harry staring into a mirror, his voice rising and falling with the strange sibilant, oddly melodic contortions of sound that was Parseltongue. She could still hear the voice that answered him, horrible and cold.

Little by little, Ginny re-constructed her mental defenses, closing her mind and forcing the dream away. The pain faded and so did the shaking.

She uncurled and forced herself to don her dressing robe and head downstairs to where the ever-present fire crackled in the hearth. Bill was asleep in an armchair, guarding the fire. She curled up on the couch, hugging her knees to her chest. She closed her eyes and breathed, trying to control her shaking.

I want him to be okay.

Even if it was just the life-debt...she wanted him to be okay.

She knew she shouldn't have lowered her defenses, but she had wanted to dream of him, if only to see him. And it wasn't like Occlumency had kept out the Harry dreams before.

She wondered what the Order would say if they knew the bond from the life-debt could get inside her Occlumency? That even with her mind fully protected, she still dreamed of Harry?

Probably not nearly as much as they'd say if they knew I'd opened my mind just to dream of him.

Part of her wondered what the wizarding world would think of the poor little Weasley girl being that intimately connected to the Boy Who Lived.

It had to be more than just the Wizarding Life Debt. Had it started before then? How could it have? He didn't know I existed!

But she had known about him.

She had always wondered about his story, wondered what it was like to grow up not knowing he had saved the world – her world – from a horrible monster's mad dreams. What would it feel like to enter the wizarding world? Would it be like coming home, or would it be an alien place?

What kind of person would he be? What kind of friends would he have?

She was only a little younger than him...maybe she could be his friend, if they went to the same magic school?

But the little girl daydreams became a schoolgirl crush as soon as she laid eyes on him in King's Cross. He had been handsome, for an eleven-year-old...lost, but with those beautiful green eyes that had tried to see everything at once. She'd known he was special, just looking at him.

Then he'd turned out to be Harry Potter, her brother's best friend. She had been so madly in love and terrified of him...and then he saved her life.

After, he had ignored the fact that she existed. Sometimes, she thought he hadn't had the chance to notice her. They didn't have any classes together; every time he started to talk to her, someone would get in the way. There would be a teacher there, or a brother or her parents.

Especially last summer. No one had let her speak to him alone for more than a few words. Nor had anyone let her be around him for longer than it took her mother to assign chores.

She had seen a glimpse of his world last summer at the Ministry, and when he had tried to send them away the desperate fear in his eyes had struck something in her.

She stared at the fire, waiting for any word.

She probably wouldn't hear anything.

There was a soft knocking sound, startling the red-headed girl. She jumped up, looking around the darkened room, and heard it again.

The front door?

She got up slowly, clutching her wand and peered out the window.

Ginny blinked in surprise when she saw Hermione's face.

Hermione? What is she doing here? I thought she was in Bulgaria!

She quickly opened the door. Hermione stepped inside and stopped right in front of Ginny.

"You were right," she said softly, "and I'm sorry. I didn't mean to forget."

Ginny hugged the older girl. "It's all right. But do you realize what time it is?"

"Of course I do," Hermione nodded. "I made Tonks bring me here anyway. It took all day, what with me not able to Apparate, and her not able to Side Along or make Portkeys."

Ginny blinked, just then noticing Tonks standing behind Hermione, levitating her trunk and looking more put-out than Hermione.

Hermione imperiously motioned Tonks past them, still looking at Ginny. "Where's Ron? We have to talk!"

Ginny gave a small smile, thinking she knew why Hermione had come to the Burrow. Maybe she read one of his letters after all?

“He’s upstairs. Go...he misses you.”

She gave Hermione’s shoulder a gentle push.

“No!” She spun around. “I’m not here about me, or Ron! I’m here because of Harry! I saw him!”

Ginny’s whole world stopped, and she sucked in air. “You saw him? You checked on him anyway?”

Hermione nodded, shutting the door behind her. “I saw him. I went to Privet Drive and his aunt...that horrible woman...I saw the cupboard where they’re keeping him. And Crookshanks found this.”

She thrust the bloody scrap of cloth into Ginny’s hands. Ginny clutched it in her fist, cold certainty mingling with the anger that had been growing all summer. They have no right to do this to him.

“You saw him?” Ginny asked again. She was terrified of the answer, but she had to know.

Hermione looked shaken, and led Ginny to the couch, making her sit down before she would say anything.

“Yes, I saw him. His aunt let something slip, about a gym where Harry and Dudley were training. I went there and tried to see him, but this great red-headed git wouldn’t let me. I went across the street to call a cab so I could stake out his house, but then I saw him! He came out of the gym to catch a bus with an older woman. He seemed to trust her.” She wiped at her eyes, annoyed at herself for crying again. “He looked...oh, god, he was so pale, so thin, and he had these bruises...”

“Who had what bruises?”

Ginny and Hermione both started and looked up at Ron, coming down the stairs, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“I heard Hermione’s voice, so I came down. When did you get here, anyway? I thought you were in Bulgaria.” He took a breath, and

looked like he was about to say something else, but one look at Hermione's face changed his mind.

"C'mere, you." He held out his arms to her; he didn't know much about comforting distraught girls, but he knew Hermione liked hugs, and she looked like she needed some kind of comfort right then. Hermione threw herself at him, holding on tightly. "Hey...shh, hey, it's okay." Ron said, surprised, awkwardly putting his arms around her. "Just start at the beginning..."

Hermione launched into a recap of what she had told Ginny. By then, she was back to sniffing, and Ron had sat her back down on the couch. She was still clutching him as if he were a lifeline.

"He was so...quiet. Not quiet like Harry normally is. It was...different. He held himself different, even moved different."

Ginny shivered, remembering the letter, how Harry had said he was changing.

Hermione sat up, pulling away from Ron, even though she was still leaning into him. "I saw him look up, and his eyes...were so empty and intense at the same time...and he had these bruises, great purple marks on his face and arms. His skin was horridly pale. He was so thin he was almost emaciated."

A note of anger was creeping back into her voice.

"I bloody well knew those Muggles would do something horrid like this." The three teens looked up to see Molly Weasley standing the doorway to her bedroom. Bill had long since woken up and was staring at them all thoughtfully.

"He was hurt, then?" Bill asked.

Hermione nodded, glaring at Tonks. "Yes."

Ron's face had darkened with anger and Ginny was pale with worry. Molly was nearly beside herself.

Hermione turned to Tonks. "Tell us what you know."

The young Auror was visibly torn. Her hair was cycling through colors and her face seemed to twist itself around. "I can't."

"You can't?" Hermione whispered, her voice crackling with sharp edges and subdued threat as she stood. "All your talk about giving the Order a chance meant nothing, then? This is your chance, Nymphadora Tonks. This is the Order's only chance. If you're not going to help us, then bloody well get out, because I won't have you telling the Order what we do next." She looked to Bill. "You too. Make your choice. This has gone far enough."

"Damn straight it has," Charlie said from the kitchen. "You vanished with barely a word, Hermione, and left us to search for you. You disobeyed orders, but you won't this time. You will stay right where you are, all of you. Tonks, go back and do your job. I'll deal with these three."

Ron was confused. Hermione had disappeared? There had been a search for her? He wasn't surprised no one had told them, but he was definitely upset about it. Just one more thing the Order of the Phoenix was going to have to answer for.

Hermione ignored Charlie and turned her gaze back to Tonks. "Make your choice."

Charlie took a step forward into the room, and Hermione's gaze shifted from Tonks to him. He just stopped moving when he met Hermione's eyes.

Tonks looked at Charlie with something akin to sympathy.

Hermione stared hard at Charlie, her eyes smoldering like heated steel. "Get out. You've no part in this. Ginny told me what you did, and I won't have you in our way. Like usual, the 'adults' have made a mess of things and we 'children' have to clean it up."

Charlie met Hermione's eyes for a long moment. "You don't want to do this, Hermione. You really don't."

“Yes. I do. I would have done it back in Little Whinging if Tonks hadn’t stopped me. Harry needs us right now. I’m not leaving him there with those people a minute longer than I have to. He’s living in a tiny cupboard under the stairs. He’s sleeping on a cot stained with his blood. He wouldn’t leave any one of us. We’re not leaving him.” Hermione had raised her wand and had it leveled at Charlie. “Get out.”

Charlie sighed. “I really wish you weren’t doing this. And I am sorry. Sorrier than you’ll ever know.” And he walked out of the room.

Ron stared at Hermione, and had to admit – he was impressed. Normally it was Harry who decided to do the stupidly heroic thing and rallied the troops. He saw her standing there, outlined by the firelight, her eyes smoldering with anger, her wand held out.

Damn. She’s beautiful. But he wouldn’t ever say that out loud. He was amused at himself for having such an out-of-place thought, but decided he really didn’t mind having it.

Hermione sat back down next to Ron and put her hand on his arm as she re-directed her glare back to Tonks.

Tonks was wringing her hands and looking at Bill. He smiled slightly and nodded to her, speaking softly, as if only to her. “It’s okay. You can tell them.”

Ron looked at Bill, his blue eyes meeting Bill’s. They were the only two of all the children to get their father’s blue eyes, and Molly had often said they were two of a kind – except for schoolwork. “You’re with us, then? You’re not going to go rat us out to the Order?”

“I’m with you,” Bill said. “I don’t like him being there any more than you do.”

Tonks threw her hands up in the air. “I am going to get into so much trouble.”

Molly sat down next to Ron and Hermione and everyone scooted down to make room for her. "That's okay dear. So are we."

Tonks sat, and folded the invisibility cloak in her lap. "I've been assigned to keep an eye on Harry for the Order, alternating nights and days. It's been bad this summer. Umbridge was there the first day to tell the Dursleys they had a free hand, as per Fudge's little proclamation. And the Dursleys have taken every advantage of that."

Molly's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Harry's Uncle is beating him," Tonks answered almost before Molly had finished her question, her hair rapidly shifting through steadily darker colors before settling on a dark auburn. She'd wanted to tell someone for weeks now. "I don't think he's gotten much food, either. Not only that, but his cousin's been training to be a fistboxer, and Harry's been his practice dummy."

She looked at Hermione, hoping the girl would understand. "I haven't been allowed to do a damn thing about it. If I tried, they would have sent someone else to watch him. I wanted to be there for him, at least a little bit. I wanted it to be someone who at least cared."

Hermione's face softened as she saw some of the anguish Tonks had been through. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"I did. I told Snape. Just like I was supposed to."

Molly's scowl deepened. "I see. Where do you fit into all of this, Hermione?"

Tonks had an answer for that, too: "Hermione here had been helping do some work for the Order in Bulgaria." Tonks looked over in time to see Ron seem to frown and cringe at the same time. Hermione looked over at him, and he forced a smile for her. He saw the fear in her eyes – fear he was going to send her away for what she'd done.

He moved closer, put a hand on her forearm and whispered into her ear. "It's okay, 'Mione. We're okay. I promise."

Some of the tension left Hermione and she collapsed back against him, trying to hide the shame and guilt in her eyes.

Tonks was looking at Bill again, but Bill was watching Ginny. She was hugging herself and staring at nothing.

“After Ginny contacted her, and McGonagall forbid her from contacting Harry, she vanished. We still don’t know how she did it, but she vanished. She left a note, but we were afraid Death Eaters had gotten to her. Planted the note or somesuch. It wouldn’t be the first time they’ve done something like that.”

Ron slipped his arms around Hermione’s waist, pulling her closer. To his surprise, she let him. He didn’t like the idea of Hermione being taken by Death Eaters – or having to run away from the Order. He didn’t want to think how she would react if the Order punished her over what she’d done.

But he was still proud of her for vanishing out from under McGonagall’s nose.

Tonks rested her forehead against her hand. “Just when we’re going to start a search for her, Hermione shows up in Little Whinging, and I almost don’t recognize her until she just about charges across a crowded street to get to Harry. If she had,” Tonks threw Hermione a glare, her eyes literally flashing red, “she would have broken the isolation Fudge imposed on him, giving the old fart more of a hold on him. So I grabbed her, and we...err...decided to come here. I couldn’t Side-Along Apparate her or make a Portkey the Ministry couldn’t track. The Knight Bus doesn’t run here anymore, because of the wards, so it took a bit work to get us both here.”

Hermione sat up. “Yes, you brought me here all right. After I disarmed you and held you at wand point.”

Ron grinned proudly, and Molly Weasley stood up.

“Well, there’s nothing to it, then.” Molly radiated the quiet confidence and intensity, the staggering surety, of a mother about to do

something to protect her children. “Ron, Ginny. Go get dressed and get your wands. We’ll be going to get him out.”

“I think not,” a cold voice sneered.

They all looked up to see Severus Snape walking in the back door, followed by Charlie. Tall and sallow and contemptuous, he strode into the middle of the living room and sneered at everyone as if they were particularly stupid children caught doing something unpleasant.

Ginny stood, stared at the Potion’s Master with undisguised anger. “Tonks said you know what they’re doing to Harry. Why is he still there?”

Snape sighed impatiently. “Watch your tone, girl. Potter is perfectly safe, if worse for the wear. I’m sure his hide can withstand a few bruises, even if his ego cannot. The Headmaster was most explicit in his final instructions to the Order. Potter is to remain with his relatives until the start of term.”

He glanced around the room. “Though it is readily apparent the Order will soon have two more empty seats, as Tonks and Granger obviously cannot be trusted not to break down every time Potter needs someone to wipe his nose.”

Molly pointed her finger at Snape. “Now you listen here!”

“Be quiet and listen for once, Molly,” Severus snapped. “We cannot remove or interfere with or even contact Potter because Cornelius Fudge, in all his great wisdom, will take him and lock him away in a place that would make the Dursleys seem like a garden resort. If you care about the boy at all, respect that those who know far more than you have already made decisions concerning the matter!”

“I will not let it be, Severus! What if the boy is seriously injured? Or injured too often? What then, do you propose?”

“Potter is one boy. If he dies, then Voldemort loses a target and the Order loses a liability. Be grateful we simply don’t hand him to the Ministry! Yes, the boy is hurt, but he is also alive.”

"For how long? How long until he can't take it anymore, or his Uncle takes things too far?" Ginny wanted to scream, to throttle the Professor, but she forced herself to at least try to sound civil.

"I hope we never find out. Now cease interfering in what is not your concern and return to your dull, quaint little lives!"

"No!" Ginny screamed. "You can't leave him there anymore, and if you do, we're going to go get him. You think you can stop us? Really stop us, without hurting us?"

"Get it through your thick skull, child. You will do nothing else. You will do nothing to attract attention. Tonks, Granger, this goes double for you. Do not leave the Burrow. Do not contact Harry Potter. The Headmaster will deal with you when he returns!"

"And just when will that be?" Molly asked in a soft, sweet voice her children knew meant certain death was approaching.

"Likely, whenever the headmaster feels like it. Which I am sure we will discover when he returns." Snape's lip curled as he continued to sneer at the Weasleys. "Do not make me force you to remain."

Bill stood and suddenly there was a sense of power and strength crackling about him like barely restrained static. In that moment, those who knew him well were reminded of Albus Dumbledore, who could do much the same thing – though compared to Dumbledore, Bill's power was a paltry thing.

Compared to Severus Snape's, his power was rather impressive.

"No. You won't." Bill's voice was soft. "You will not threaten my mother or any member of my family on our own home. And if you try something so utterly stupid as trying to keep me or my family from going where we wish, I'll show you exactly why even the Aurors are afraid of Curse Breakers."

Snape's sneer faltered as he met Bill's eyes, but he held his ground. He'd stood before the Dark Lord in all his rage and he'd stood before

Dumbledore, his mind laid bare. He wouldn't be cowed by a Weasley, of all people.

"Take the boy from his relatives and he will be no longer be protected from the Dark Lord. He will be in Cornelius Fudge's hands, and even if, for some reason, Dolores Umbridge doesn't torture him into insanity, one of the many Death Eaters working for the Ministry would be delighted to take him before the Dark Lord." His sneer re-gained its former prominence as he turned back to Ginny and Hermione. "Potter will live through the summer. Who knows, maybe he'll actually learn to keep his mouth shut and that the world does not revolve around him."

"What makes you think he'll survive?" Hermione asked, refusing to flinch away from him. This wasn't Hogwarts. The only power he had over her here was what she chose to give him.

She gave him nothing.

"Fudge needs him alive," Snape drawled slowly, as if explaining to someone he suspected of being mentally challenged. "I would have thought, Granger, that you of all people would grasp what the Minister is doing?"

Hermione looked at Snape as if Snape were the stupid one. "Obviously. Harry will eventually do something to make his uncle mad enough to really hurt him. The Ministry steps in, 'rescues' him and Fudge is hailed as a hero, Professor Dumbledore is revealed as the one who left him there, defenseless, and he won't have a say in what happens to Harry anymore. His credibility will be damaged if not destroyed, and Fudge will have a much freer hand."

Snape almost looked somewhat mollified. "Perhaps you have a hope of understanding the situation, Granger. Now, just maybe, you can use that overly eager intellect of yours to figure out why you shouldn't so much as speak to Potter until he's removed from there?"

She smiled prettily at Snape, as if humoring him. "No need. As of tonight, Fudge has failed. Professor Dumbledore isn't around, so he can't be blamed. We go in, rescue him, and take with us proof

Umbridge interfered with Harry. Petunia has a letter from Umbridge giving them carte blanche to keep Harry from the wizarding world and promises protection from the Order. I read it. We steal the letter and go to the media and the Wizengamot with our proof, showing that as soon as Harry was taken from Dumbledore's protection and as soon as Fudge interfered, he was beaten and starved. Fudge is hoisted on his own petard, and Harry is safe."

Snape looked taken aback. "Where would you put him, Granger, that the Dark Lord could not reach him?"

Hermione held up her hand and ticked off fingers. "Hogwarts. The muggle world – it's easy to hide someone in a hotel behind a false name and a paper trail. Durmstrang. We have allies there now. I helped see to that." She looked at Bill. "I'm sure Gringotts has places even his minions can't find we could use, for a price." Then she shrugged. "Or, really, anywhere. Because I'm sure someone in the Order can cast a Fidelius Charm."

"Very well, Miss Granger. How do you propose to block the Ministry from preventing your little rescue? They have plenty of agents watching Privet Drive." Snape was sounding less and less smug.

Ginny's eyes blazed like hot coals. So Fudge's little goons were watching him too? Is Percy one of them? Is he enjoying watching Harry get beaten?

Hermione rolled her eyes at Snape. "One person Harry trusts sneaks in under an invisibility cloak, we disillusion his things, Harry hides in his own cloak, and we sneak back out."

Ron grinned at Hermione. She was good.

"It's a workable plan," Bill said calmly.

Snape smiled. It was a cold, bitter, triumphant expression. "Yes. And if Miss Granger had bothered to put half as much thought into her earlier search as she did this plan, it might have worked. But while she was dragging Tonks across England, Potter vanished. As we did not have a guard to follow him, we no longer know where he is. The

instruments in Dumbledore's office show he is not at Privet Drive, and nothing I or Kingsley Shacklebolt have done has revealed his location." His eyes fell back on Hermione. "This is exactly the sort of thing I would normally classify as an 'emergency' and would therefore contact the Headmaster. However, as someone has already used our only way of contacting him, I cannot."

Hermione slumped back in her chair with a horrified gasp. What had she done? Ron put his arms back around her. But even as she swam through the guilt, another thought slipped through.

Dumbledore was still gone. No one had heard from him yet. She wasn't sure what it meant, especially in light of her letter to him, but she didn't like it. She'd expected him to have sent word by now, at least to the rest of the Order. If only to tell them what to do about her.

Molly stood, and to everyone's satisfaction, Snape took an involuntary step back at the fury in her eyes. "If you're so all knowing, I suggest you find him! Immediately!"

Snape sniffed contemptuously. "Sit down, woman. Fortunately, until this point, Tonks has performed her duty, and I know enough about Potter's habits to have already begun a search. Arabella Figg and Mundungus Fletcher are watching Privet Drive. Moody and Shacklebolt are watching the gym. If, by tomorrow morning, Potter has not re-appeared, we will widen the search. Once he is located, then you can attempt Granger's plan, if you still believe a bit of actual discipline is harmful to Potter's health." He smiled his twisted smile again. "If I bother to inform any of you as to his whereabouts."

Snape whirled to stride back out the door, but Bill was already standing in front of it. No one had noticed him move. His wand was in his hand, held loosely at his side.

"You knew what was happening to him. If he's really been hurt, I'm holding you personally responsible."

The threat hung in the air for a moment before Snape responded. It wasn't lost on anyone watching that his sneer was less than enthusiastic.

"You act as if he were your family, Weasley. He's not."

Bill's smile lacked any emotion at all. "You let us decide who is or isn't family. It's safer for you that way."

"This is the last time I will allow you to threaten me, Weasley," Snape hissed.

"I've never once threatened you, Severus," Bill said coolly. "I've just told you what would happen. If you've let your juvenile grudge against Harry's father blind you to his danger, then you'll have proven us right about you. We'll know you're a coward and a liar and a man so petty he won't let go of something that happened before Harry was born. You'll pay for it and not a single one of us will have to lift a wand."

"How dare you judge me!" Snape's hand twitched as if he desperately wanted to go for his wand.

"Bill, that's enough!" Charlie said.

"Shut up, Charlie. You've done enough damage." Bill's words snapped through the air like a whip.

Charlie actually shrank back from the tone in his brother's voice.

Bill and Snape glared at each other. Finally, Snape broke away. "I will inform you when I learn where Potter is. Until then, wait here."

Bill smiled again. "Thank you, Severus. I'll expect to hear from you soon. If I don't, I'll come find you." And he got out Snape's way.

As the door closed behind Snape, Molly looked at Charlie, her eyes sad. "Charlie, I think it would be best if you went back to Fleur for a few days, until this is all sorted out. We'll talk about this later."

There is something about the disappointment of one's mother that can hurt, even when one has full faith in what they are doing and why they're doing it. That pain showed clearly on Charlie's face as he nodded.

“Sure, Mum,” he tentatively gave his mother a hug. “I really am sorry, you know. I just think interfering in this is the wrong thing to do.”

Molly held her son for a moment. “I know, dear, I know. But you’re wrong about this and you’re wrong about Harry, no matter what Fleur saw.”

Charlie pulled back and shrugged. “I want to be wrong, I really do. So does she.”

Molly patted him on the cheek. “Go on, then.”

Charlie walked outside, looking for all the world like a man walking into exile.

Ron and Hermione shared a glance. Fleur had seen something? And what about Harry was Charlie wrong about?

Hermione and Ron both looked over at Ginny, who nodded at them. She’d noticed it too. As usual, there was more going on than even the adults they nominally trusted was willing to share, and as usual, it was about Harry.

Does he ever get a break? Ginny wondered.

Molly plied the three of them with hot chocolate and biscuits, got Ron to carry Hermione’s bag upstairs, and the adults retired to the kitchen to talk amongst themselves about things they didn’t think the children needed to know.

Hermione watched them in disgust. The Order had forfeited their chance. As usual, it would be the ‘children’ who would deal with things. They would save Harry, despite the Order and despite the Ministry. She had no faith in Snape to tell them truth about Harry, even if he could be found. She had some small hope Molly would tell them, but she wasn’t going to count on it.

Fine, she thought, scooping up Crookshanks, if this is how they want it, then this it how it will be.

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Five years of habitually hiding from the adults to clandestinely discuss whatever current or impending crises loomed over their heads had given Ron and Hermione lots of practice in sneaking about and hiding what they were doing.

They met in Fred and George's old room, despite the risk of booby-traps and leftover pranks, because they were fairly sure the twins would have found and removed any way for the Order to listen in, to say nothing of whatever other protections the twins had come up with. Not being able to use magic over the summer had never stopped those Fred and George.

They sat as far from the door as they could, huddled in a corner. Hermione sat in against the back wall with Ron and Ginny on either side of her. None of them had their backs to the door.

Crookshanks was lying in front of the door. If anyone came too close, he'd wake up and they would know. They kept the lights off to hide the fact they were in the room at all.

"For five years now," Hermione said, "I have tried to advocate caution. I've always said we should talk to the professors, trust the fully-trained witches and wizards to take care of things. But they never seem to. It's always come down to us, in the end. I don't know why it does, really, but it's readily apparent it's down to us again."

Ginny's mouth twitched into a half-smile. "Seems odd it always ends up being a bunch of kids who save the day, doesn't it?"

Hermione sighed. "I hate this. We've done so much, been through so much and they still don't trust us to do anything. Even with everything I figured out, they're still hiding secrets about Harry. It always comes down to him, you know. Always. And I think I know why."

She launched into a quick recap of the conclusions she'd reached in Bulgaria: the prophecy the Order had been guarding was about Harry

and Voldemort, and it proved Harry could defeat him, and because of that, Harry would always be the crux of events concerning Voldemort.

“Even when Sirius escaped, it was about Voldemort and Harry,” Hermione didn’t even notice she didn’t always stutter when she said the name these days. Ron and Ginny didn’t so much as twitch. “Peter Pettigrew escaped and went on to bring his master back. Prophecies are conditions of possible – or likely – future events. I don’t understand it all yet. I need to research Voldemort and research prophecies and divination,” Hermione said this last with distaste, “and figure things out. Still, that’s neither here nor there. Until they find Harry, we can’t do anything to help him, but I want to test a theory.”

“What theory is that?” Ron asked.

Hermione looked at him, and could see the curiosity – and hurt – in his bright blue eyes. Even in the dark, she could see their color. They were sitting close enough for her to feel the heat from his body, and it made her shiver.

This wasn’t like Ron. He was acting like everything was forgiven. He hadn’t once mentioned her letter or her going to Bulgaria.

It’s just because he’s more worried about Harry than he is mad at me. She knew he was eventually going to say something about her letter, and when he did, she knew the argument would be explosive, even for them. But maybe after, he really will forgive me.

Until then, she had to focus on Harry. “I want Ginny to see if she can sense if Harry’s okay or not. I think their connection has grown strong enough that Ginny has been sensing Harry being in danger all summer, and I think if she concentrates, she can sense if he’s in danger now.”

Hermione didn’t mention her building fears about that connection or why it had suddenly grown so strong. It seemed to grow with his link to Voldemort, and was manifesting in the wake of his failed Occlumency training.

Ginny paled. Hermione was more right than she knew. "There's nothing to test. I can sense if he's in danger or if something's a danger to him." She briefly explained the feelings she'd had during the meeting the Weasley children had held and how she'd dreamed of him that night.

The older girl looked at Ginny, and saw the expression her face. It was the same expression that had been there as long as Hermione had known Ginny – an expression for feelings Hermione thought Ginny had sworn away.

"Ginny, there's one thing I don't understand, that might make a difference in things, believe it or not. I thought you'd gotten over Harry?"

"I said I'd given up." Ginny whispered. "I never got over him. I tried. I dated Michael Corner. I wanted to date Dean Thomas. I was forcing myself to see him as just another brother. He was acting so stupid all last year, especially over Cho Chang."

Hermione nodded, glancing over at Ron. But from his expression, nothing Ginny was saying was new to him. If Ginny's okay talking about this in front of Ron...

"Only, he wasn't acting stupid. Not really," Ginny continued quietly. "He didn't know any better with Cho. How could he know anything about dating or girls? Where would he have learned it?"

"I don't know," Hermione answered. "I didn't give that much thought until much later. I was too focused on OWLS and the DA last year. I missed things I should have seen."

"I don't know that he would have let us in, even if we'd known to try," Ron said. "Ever since the Third Task, he's been closed off. We didn't help much, not writing to him last summer. I think it damaged his trust in us. This summer's been no better, really, with only Ginny able to send him a letter."

Ron had tried, after Hermione's letter had come, but Pig had always come back with the letter still attached to his leg.

“So? You’re both human.” Ginny scoffed. “You’re mortal, just like the rest of us. You made mistakes. Just like him. He’s forgiven you, you’ve forgiven him. And I don’t know that you could have helped him last year. I don’t know that any of us could. The DA was as close as we could get.” She gave Hermione a steady look. “And that was all you.”

“Why do you think we couldn’t have done more?” Hermione had always known relationships were complicated; relationships with or around the Boy Who Lived were bound to be worse. His life – their lives – were already dangerous and complicated and confusing; adding romance and relationships into the mix made it more so.

Ginny sighed. “He was so angry, so hurt, last year. But he had a right to be.” Ginny started ticking things off on her fingers. “He knows – everyone knows – Tom is out to kill him, and no one will tell him anything he needs to know. The one person he needs the most – Professor Dumbledore – wouldn’t even look at him. Almost everyone thought he was crazy or a liar or worse, and because of Umbridge, he wasn’t allowed to defend himself. He even got in trouble for saving his cousin from the Dementors.” She paused. “Then despite everything he’s done, he’s denied being a Prefect, which only makes people think Dumbledore had lost confidence in him. If I were Harry, I’d think so too. If he’d been made Prefect, people would have seen it as a sign Dumbledore trusted him.”

Hermione nodded. “Without Dumbledore’s support, Harry lost confidence in himself.”

Ron winced. They all knew what Dumbledore meant to Harry and how much he relied on the Headmaster’s support and quiet guidance. Without it, Harry had lost his anchor. “If he thought Dumbledore didn’t trust him, there’s nothing we could have said or done. He wouldn’t have let us in.”

It didn’t make his failure to be there for his friend hurt any less, but at least he was starting to understand something of what had been going through Harry’s head. He didn’t know if Ginny’s insight came from the bond or from the letters, but he was glad for it.

Hermione thought about telling her friends her worries about Dumbledore still being out of contact, but decided to save those for later. Dumbledore could take care of himself, and likely had a good reason for staying away.

Ginny continued quietly. "Umbridge tortured him for speaking out. For defending himself. He will never lose that scar."

"He won't?" Hermione asked. "How would you know that?"

Ginny shook her head. "I looked up the blood quill in Hogwarts' library. It's as permanent as the scar Tom gave him."

"Bloody hell," Ron said. "What about Lee Jordan and the others?"

"They'll be fine," Ginny said, "they didn't have nearly as much exposure to it as Harry did. But the pain of it, and the pressures of OWLS and the hell of studying Occlumency with a bastard like Snape..."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Ginny, I'm not sure how much of his trouble learning Occlumency was Snape or his own resistance to the idea."

"Considering how Snape feels about Harry, there is no way for learning Occlumency to be easy. It would have about killed him each time."

Sighing, Hermione bit her lower lip, trying to find a way to politely phrase her question. "Ginny, how would you know what studying Occlumency is like?"

"Because I learned it," Ginny stated flatly. "The summer after my first year. Bill taught me."

Hermione blinked. "What?"

"Bill taught me Occlumency after Tom possessed me, when we were in Egypt that summer. I was so scared of it happening again...he saw

me one night, after a nightmare, and we talked. He taught me.” Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell anyone. No one knows, but you, Bill and Ron.” She swallowed hard and her eyes lost focus. She seemed to be talking to herself. “I’ll tell Harry myself. I promised. No secrets.”

She shook herself out of it and looked back at Hermione. “But it means I do have an idea of what Harry went through to learn from Snape. The kinds of places Snape went in his mind.”

Hermione wasn’t sure what to say. Or to think. How had she missed so much of what was going on? How could I have not known how deeply her first year had affected her?

Ron looked at his sister. “After you told me, it finally made sense why Bill asked us to come visit him in Egypt. I think he suspected you’d need him.”

Ginny nodded. She and Bill had always been close, even though he’d spent most of his life away from her. He wasn’t as protective as the rest of her brothers and never seemed to lose patience with her like their parents had. But with seven children, who could blame them for being overwhelmed sometimes?

Hermione couldn’t stop staring at Ginny. She’d always thought of Ginny as something of a silly child. A girl with a girlish obsession, but also as her only female friend, and the only person who had a clue of understanding how she felt about her two best friends – especially the redheaded one.

Now I learn that Ginny has knowledge and abilities I don’t. I didn’t even think to look up the blood quill, let alone know what Occlumency was like for Harry.

“How bad was it for him?” Ron was the one to ask, and it shamed Hermione that she was afraid to.

The question seemed to fall flat, and Hermione felt she should say something to Ginny about her first year, her own Occlumency studies, but she couldn’t bring herself to.

“Rape,” Ginny whispered. “Tom Riddle raped my mind and my soul. He twisted me and hurt me and manipulated me until my mind was weak enough to take over. Bit by bit, stage by stage, he eroded away the part of me that made me who I am by working inside out. Memory by memory, feeling by feeling. He destroyed the natural walls every person has that makes their mind their own. Bill had to enter my mind and walk me back through everything, every memory and emotion, and help me order them, focus them, control them. I love and trust my brother, Hermione. I know he would never hurt me, but it was like being raped all over again when he walked me through it.”

“Snape hates Harry. It’s a soul-deep hatred. He already uses everything that happens to Harry or around Harry as a weapon. Now he knows Harry’s darkest thoughts and feelings, the memories he never shared with anyone, the things that he probably doesn’t like to share with himself. With each bit of knowledge of Harry that Snape got, he would understand Harry better, how to go deeper into his mind. I don’t think Snape would hesitate to use any of that knowledge to hurt Harry.”

“No.” Hermione, despite her distrust of the Order, didn’t want to believe even Snape would be that vindictive. “He wouldn’t do that. Not even him.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, “he would.”

“We have to face what he might be like when we get him back,” Ginny said. None of them wanted to think they wouldn’t get him back. Even if he had gone missing, the Order would find him and they’d rescue him and bring him to the Burrow. None of them were willing to consider the alternative. “He’s been kept isolated all summer. Between his Uncle and his cousin beating him, starvation rations, living in a cupboard, on top of everything else that’s happened...”

It was Hermione’s turn to shiver. She’d read enough to know what kind of conditions Ginny was describing. “They’re trying to break him. If Fudge got a hold of him after all that...he’d be weak, vulnerable.”

Ginny shook her head. “No. He’d be angry. He’d lash out. Harry doesn’t do weak. Not like that.”

Hermione wasn't so sure she agreed. She'd read enough psychology to know what that kind of treatment could do the human mind.

Ron cut in. "What about what Mum said, about Charlie and Fleur? What could it have meant?"

"We know Fleur's part-Veela. Their natural magic is very subtle and most of it is focused on the mind and emotions. There's been a lot of part-Veela who had visions," Hermione said carefully. "It's possible Fleur had some kind of a vision. Though of what, I can't guess, except that it involved Harry."

"How do we find out? They're not telling us anything." Ginny was hugging herself again.

"The same way we always do," Ron said. "We ask questions when they aren't expecting them. We sneak around, eavesdrop and keep putting together the pieces until we figure it out."

Ginny felt a warm flush as she realized Ron was including her.

Hermione looked at Ginny. "Do you think you can sense him through the bond?"

Ginny shook her head. "No. Not even if I stopped using Occlumency. I don't think it really works like that. I think I'd know if he were in imminent danger, but I don't think I'd know more than that, unless I dreamed about him." She hugged herself and whispered. "I'm afraid to do that again...Harry is so close to Tom that he might sense me. And I don't know I'd be strong enough to keep him out, not if he got me with my defenses down."

"Damn," Ron said.

Hermione looked thoughtful. "This is ephemeral magic, which means we really don't know how it works or even why. But I think we can take it as a good sign Ginny doesn't think he's in imminent danger."

They were desperate for every shred of hope, no matter how slim it was.

Ron stood up. "I don't think there's much more we can do until we find out where he is, and we won't be able to help him if we're dead on our feet." He held out his hands and helped both girls stand.

He hugged his sister and Hermione, but as they all slipped out the door, he said: "I hope you're right about that prophecy, Hermione."

"How could you say such a thing?" She was horrified at Ron, but he just shook his head.

"He's gonna try to kill Harry whether or not your right. If you are right, then we know for sure Harry's got a chance."

Neither Ginny or Hermione could think of anything to say.

- 0 -

Ginny and Hermione settled in Ginny's room, but neither girl could sleep.

They sat on the floor in the darkness.

"Ron hates me, doesn't, he?" Hermione finally said.

"No," Ginny shook her head. "He doesn't hate you. He's hurt, badly, by what you wrote, but I don't think he could ever hate you."

Hermione pulled her knees up to her chest. "How can I fix it?"

Ginny sat cross-legged and was suddenly struck by something Harry had said in one of his letters, about secrets and how they destroyed people. "Tell him the truth, Hermione. It's the only thing you really can do."

"I don't know if I can," she whispered. "I think the truth might be worse than a lie this time."

“Why?” Ginny asked, at the same time wondering why Hermione had written her with the truth of what she was doing in Bulgaria instead of Ron.

“We went to Bulgaria to create contacts and supply lines for the Order,” Hermione explained. “Officially, the government there takes no position on Voldemort. Unofficially, they support him. More than half the Bulgarian Ministry are Death Eaters, and many more are sympathetic to his cause. Victor and Karkaroff are the leaders of the resistance there, and neither one of them trusted the Order. I went with Minerva, erm, Professor McGonagall because Victor trusts me. I used his affection for me to get him to meet with Min – Professor McGonagall and to work with the Order.”

“They used you,” Ginny stated simply.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “I’m not upset at them about it. I knew what was happening going into it. Defeating Voldemort is more important than my being upset about being used. Even if our Ministry were willing to really work against him, they couldn’t contact the Bulgarian resistance, because it’s strictly illegal.”

“Why not?” Ginny was honestly confused.

“The Bulgarian Ministry and ours are technically allies. If our Ministry contacted an illegal group inside Bulgaria, it might be enough to push the Bulgarians into openly supporting Voldemort. That’s why the Order is necessary, for all their flaws. They can do what the Ministry can’t.”

“What’s going on between you and Victor, then?” Ginny was starting to see some of why Hermione didn’t want to tell Ron the truth – Ron had never been reasonable where Victor Krum was concerned.

“Nothing, really. He tried to romance me a bit, but when I was hesitant, he backed off. He was too busy organizing the Bulgarian resistance to woo a British schoolgirl. He knew why I was there, too. He even admitted he wouldn’t have trusted anyone but me or Harry.”

“Why Harry?”

“Because he’s fought Voldemort face to face so many times. Victor figures if there’s anyone he can trust to do what’s right in the fight against him, it’s Harry.”

Ginny nodded. Hermione could barely make out the motion in the dark.

“So why tell me the truth and not Ron?”

“I wanted one of us to know what was going on. I couldn’t get a letter to Harry and I didn’t know how Ron would react, so that left you. And because I couldn’t trust Ron not to overreact and do something to endanger our mission, I had to keep him from interfering. So I sent him that letter.”

Ginny frowned at Hermione. “You risked your friendship with Ron to protect the Order?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, her voice soft. “Ginny, more people are going to die and be hurt by this war than just us. Muggles can’t defend themselves against Voldemort or Death Eaters. Most witches and wizards can’t, either. They don’t have Harry teaching them how to fight. This is bigger than any one of us.”

Ginny nodded again. She didn’t like it, but Hermione was right. “I still think you should tell him the truth. Give him a chance.”

“If he doesn’t understand?”

“We cross that bridge if we come to it. Until then, try to give him the benefit of the doubt. From the way he was acting tonight, I don’t think he hates you.”

“Yeah,” Hermione said, remembering how Ron had held her. “I guess not. I’m just afraid.” She rubbed her eyes. “Sometimes I think they only want me around because I’m smart...” She sighed. “I hate wondering that...but they’re all I have, you know?”

Ginny sighed, and awkwardly rubbed Hermione's back. "Trust me, they want you there. Do you know how often they defend you against people who badmouth you? Or how often the two of them worry about you being holed up in the library? Or that they go up to the library and sit, pretending to study so you won't be alone?"

Hermione blinked in surprise. "Really? And how would you know all that?"

Ginny blushed. "Because I don't have many friends in my year...especially not after I started dating Michael. So I tag along with Ron and Harry...I don't think they notice. At least, I try really hard to keep them from noticing."

"Oh." Hermione looked a little guilty. "I didn't know you were so lonely...I mean, I thought you and Colin were close..."

Ginny shook her head. "Not since the Tournament. He's never forgiven me for not going to the ball with Harry, no matter what it would have done to Neville."

Hermione was genuinely confused. "Why not?"

Ginny pulled away, unable to look at Hermione. "Because he's the one who had to calm me down after Ron asked Harry to take me to the Yule Ball the way he did. And he's the one who had to keep me from killing Parvati for leaving him standing there. He's the one who held me while I cried about Harry Potter yet again. He said he couldn't...wouldn't...watch me do that to myself."

Hermione nodded. "I imagine that would be hard for him...and I imagine he has some romantic idea that you and Harry are meant to be, or would be perfect for each other."

"No," Ginny answered, her voice barely a whisper. "He thinks I'm the only girl besides you that cares about Harry's happiness."

Hermione felt a chill. Ginny was dangerously preoccupied with Harry – new revelations notwithstanding, she was dedicating her life to someone who might never see her as more than a little sister. "Ginny,

this isn't healthy. This isn't safe. You need to let go of this obsession with Harry before it destroys you. Figure out where the bond ends and your feelings begin."

"How?" Ginny asked, hiding her face behind her hair. "How do I get over this kind of feeling? I can see him and feel him in my dreams...I dreamed he was hurt, beaten – and now you and Tonks tell me I was right. Tonight I dreamed Voldemort was torturing him in his dreams...how do you get over it when you can see right into him?"

"You dreamed about him? You dreamed he was hurt?" Stunned, Hermione felt dizzy. How could she see him in her dreams? Let alone dream the truth?

She'd known Ginny and Harry were exchanging letters. Everyone in the Order knew that, and McGonagall had told her Snape had overheard Ginny talking about dreams, but for those dreams to be real?

"I dream about him at least once a summer. Sometimes at Hogwarts. It's always just one little detail that ends up true. The scar on his hand. Or the bruises all over him. But the dreams are so real. We talk, sometimes. Other times, we just sit. Or hold each other. I can feel him in the dreams, just like I can feel the carpet here. So how can I get over him when those dreams – dreams with some element of truth to them – keep giving me hope?"

The bond. It has to be the bond. Hermione shook her head. "I don't know, Ginny. I can't even imagine."

Ginny shivered, and hugged herself. "He saved me, Hermione. Then at the Ministry...I saw what it must be like for him all the time. I was so afraid...Neville, Luna – they wouldn't have come without me convincing him. If they got hurt, that would be my fault. And then when you went down, and the brain went after Ron..." She drew her knees up to her chest. "It's harder now because I think I'm beginning to understand him. I can't help but want to make his pain go away."

Hermione looked thoughtful for a long moment. "Then why did you date Michael Corner and Dean Thomas?"

Ginny shrugged. "I told you. I'd given up. It was a hopeless cause. It never meant the feelings went away." She looked up. "Mum's right. Someone has to be there for him – not because of Voldemort, or because he might save us all or because of anything else but him."

Sighing, Hermione raised an eyebrow and took on her best lecturing tone. She had to test Ginny, to see how real this was. "I really don't think that's a good idea, Ginny, for you to try to do that. He's already very selfish as it is sometimes..."

"He has to be." Ginny whispered. "He would have to be to survive...and look at what he's survived so far. And he's selfish, yes. He wants all his pain for himself. He doesn't want to share it and make everyone else hurt. He'd cut us all off and push away if he thought it would save us, and he would blame himself for us being in danger."

Hermione looked at Ginny, re-evaluating the redhead's relationship with Harry. I have to ask her. I have to know, if only for Harry's sake.

"Do you want Harry Potter or the Boy Who Lived?" Hermione asked softly.

The redheaded girl shrugged. "Harry is one and the same. He just doesn't know it."

Hermione blinked. Ginny's insight had more merit than she wanted to admit.

"Do you think you love him?"

Ginny sighed, and climbed into bed. "The emotion's not like that. Not like what you think. This isn't some crush, or some attraction, or some great romance I think I have to have." She looked down at the older girl. "This is about me knowing that he would do anything to save any one of us from what he is willingly putting himself through. I just wish I knew why he was doing this to himself. He's smart enough to figure out how to escape if he wanted to."

Hermione rested her chin on her fist. "Yes, he is and he could. Only, for some reason, he's not. The catch is that Harry can be punished for causing adult wizards to interfere in his domestic situation, but he can't get in trouble for voluntarily leaving his domestic situation."

Ginny rolled over again, unable to get comfortable. "And Dumbledore's got him convinced he can't leave. So he won't. And of course, Dumbledore won't tell us what he's told Harry to convince him to stay."

Hermione made an indignant 'hmp' noise. "I know, I know...it's just there's something more between them now. I saw it after the Ministry, when we left Hogwarts for the summer. They've always been closer than they've let on, but this goes beyond that, and I hate being left out of the loop! How am I supposed to help him if he doesn't let me?!"

Ginny shrugged. "Easy. Don't let him alone, or let him hide. Make him deal with the fact that we're here and aren't going anywhere."

Hermione mumbled back: "Good luck. That's not the best way to deal with Harry."

Ginny scoffed. "You mean pestering him and asking questions until his head is ready to explode? I meant just go and sit with him while he broods. Give him a hug, offer him a shoulder to lean on, for just a few minutes, at least!"

Slightly offended, Hermione rolled away from Ginny. "I do not pester. And he shouldn't brood!"

"Why not?" Ginny asked. "How else is he supposed to figure anything out for himself if he doesn't sit there and think about it? And what's so hard about just sitting there and rubbing his back or giving him a shoulder to lean on while he thinks?"

Hermione ticked reasons off on her fingers. "First off, Harry refuses almost all physical contact that's not forced on him. Even his kiss with Cho was her initiative and his response. Second, when he goes to brood, he doesn't want to be found. If there's anyone who can hide in

plain sight, it's Harry. And third, there's nothing wrong with it...except that it does him no good!"

Ginny rolled her eyes and sat up. "Oh? So what does help? Forcing him to go read and research and analyze until he's sick to his stomach? Is it too much to ask that he be allowed to just sit and think about some of what he's been through?"

"If that's all Harry was doing, it would be fine. If he's just wallowing and blaming himself, like last Christmas, it's not. Harry's never been taught how to deal with his emotions, and he usually ends up handling things like Cedric and Sirius poorly."

"Then what do you suggest?" Ginny asked.

"Harry copes best when he has something to concentrate on. The DA, for example, or training for Quidditch or the Tournament. If I'm right and he's really going to be the one to kill Voldemort, then he needs to train. He's a powerful wizard, Ginny, but he's not a skilled wizard. This next year, I plan to help him train. Focus him on beating Voldemort and keeping him from killing too many more."

Ginny had to admit she was impressed. It was a good idea, and one Harry would be receptive to. "What did you have in mind?"

"The DA," Hermione said. "I'm going to try to get him to continue it, because we could all use the extra training and practice, because we'll be fighting too. Someone has to guard his back. It'll be a good way to get Harry to study and practice the skills he needs. I'll tell him what I'm doing, of course, but it's obvious at this point Dumbledore can't or won't train him for whatever reason. That leaves us."

"How? How can we train Harry enough to defeat Tom? He's powerful, Hermione. Even at sixteen, he had such power and knowledge. Dumbledore is the only who's ever been able to stand against him."

"Exactly," Hermione said. "I plan to study Dumbledore's life and see if I can't re-create some of what he studied and went through to defeat Gindelwald. And Harry has something 'Tom' never did."

“Us,” Ginny said. “Harry’s not alone.”

Hermione smiled. “If I’m right about the prophecy, Harry can do this. He can learn what he needs to know and become powerful and knowledgeable enough to win. We just have to convince him of it.”

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As Ron, Ginny and Hermione went upstairs, no doubt to plot how to rescue Harry despite him being missing and in spite of Severus Snape, Tonks slipped quietly outside, wishing she could be a part of that rescue. It was the least she owed Harry Potter.

Bill followed her outside, closing the door quietly behind him.

The night air was cooler than it’d been all summer and the sky was clear; the stars hung in the sky, glittering like a hundred thousand tears suspended in the air.

Tonks was standing on the edge of the porch, her hair slowly shifting through dark colors. She was staring at the ground, and Bill could see the tear-tracks on her pale cheeks.

He slowly walked up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. She smiled a bit, but didn’t look up. Neither one of them said anything for a bit, but Bill took a step closer, until his chest was nearly touching her back.

“I failed,” she whispered. “I always knew I would, but why now? Why this?”

“How did you fail, Nymph?”

It was a token of how upset she was that she didn’t scold him for using a variation of her hated first name.

“How didn’t I fail? I stood there and watched his Uncle beat him, and that was just what happened in the backyard. I stood there and watched him fight his cousin. I saw him getting paler and thinner and more worn down every day and I did nothing, because ‘it was the

right thing to do'. Because that was my job." She didn't bother trying to hide the bitterness in her voice. "My job is supposed to be protecting people, not letting them get hurt." Her voice was thick with suppressed sobs, but she kept talking. "Hermione was right. We're being so stupid. I'm a trained Auror. I'm not the best, but I'm pretty good. I should have been able to take her, but I couldn't because I assumed she was just a kid. I assumed she wouldn't use magic. Who would expect Hermione to break the rules?"

Bill put his other hand on her other shoulder. "No one, least of all us. She got into the Order partially because we thought she'd follow the rules."

Tonks nodded and leaned back into him, taking comfort from his warm and solid presence. Bill started massaging her lightly, his thumbs running up and down the back of her neck.

"Is that what we've been doing all along? Just assuming they're kids and can't do anything, even though they've proven the can? I saw the mess they made of the Department of Mysteries. They led some of Voldemort's best on a merry chase and took down more than a few on their own."

Bill shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. But part of the Order's job is to protect the people in the most danger, and that's Harry and his friends." He left it unspoken that several of those friends were his younger siblings. "I don't think we're handling things right, though. I don't really know what to do different, but I know something has to change."

Tonks nodded, bowing her head to give his hands better access. "I still failed. I even failed the Order by telling what I knew."

"It shouldn't have been kept secret in the first place," Bill said softly. "Hermione figured out a way to get Harry out of there. I'd like to think the Order is at least as smart as a bright schoolgirl and could have figured out the same thing."

Tonks turned around and put her hands flat on his chest. "Could we?"

“I’d really hope so,” Bill said, sounding both amused and serious. He let his arms go around her, and she leaned into him, letting herself be held. Bill felt her tears soak into his shirt. “You didn’t fail, Nymph. The Order – the rest of us – we failed you, by making you deal with it alone. We failed you by making you do what we did.” He tightened his arms around her. “I’m sorry.”

He just stood there and held her while she cried silently into his chest.

End Chapter

CHAPTER TWENTY

Without Reason

Gracie dropped him off at the front door of the gym with the key, so he could let Dudley in.

But Harry waited a moment before going inside.

The sun was coming up early, and he didn't think Gracie would begrudge him a moment to watch the sunrise. He watched the colors, most of all: orange met blue clashing with red fading to purple, all of it highlighted by the warm golden glow of the sun coming up over the horizon.

Harry smiled at that, enjoying the brief sense of renewal.

He felt better that morning than he had in awhile. He had, indeed, gotten breakfast that morning, after having slept well for the remainder of the night. He'd discovered Gracie didn't really wake up until she'd had at least two cups of tea and a cigarette.

It wasn't long before Vernon dropped off Dudley. "Morning, Potter. Nice outfit. And a haircut. Gracie's gonna spoil you."

Harry grinned, and shrugged. He was dressed in his new training pants and a new t-shirt. "Think your Mum and Dad would let her keep me?"

"Probably, if you so much as mentioned the possibility," Dudley said.

"How was the dance?" Harry asked, fiddling with the key.

"Fun. I met a girl. I like the girl. I think she tolerates me. Better than average start." Dudley answered with a fatalistic shrug.

"Hope you have better luck with her than I've had with women," Harry said, trying to unlock the gym.

To Harry's surprise, it was already unlocked.

He walked into the gym, and blinked at the sudden darkness – and the sudden silence. He could barely hear Dudley walk in behind him.

McAllister's was a lot of things, but dark and silent were not among them. The darkness was strange; it was thick, heavy, almost palpable. Harry couldn't see anything, even though when he turned around, he could see the sun streaming in through the windows, but it was as if light did not exist beyond them.

A harsh, pleased laugh greeted Harry.

"Lumos."

The voice sounded distantly familiar, but he didn't pause to think on it. He whipped out his own wand as light flared. He saw Dudley a few feet away, crouched in a fighting stance.

In a circle around them, in dark robes and white masks, were twelve Death Eaters.

The one with the lit wand laughed. "You should learn to guard your dreams better, Potter. The Dark Lord saw this place and sent us to fetch you. He misses you so, you see."

The Death Eater to the right of the speaker gestured languidly to Dudley with his wand. "The Muggle can leave. We don't want him."

Dudley sneered at the Death Eater. "Make me, freak."

The Death Eater's posture changed, and he pointed his wand at Dudley. "I mean it, Muggle. Leave."

"Something tells me you circus rejects don't want to make me." The expression of disgust on Dudley's face would have made Uncle Vernon proud.

Harry glanced over at Dudley, and whispered. "When I move, run. Okay?"

Dudley shook his head, looking angry. "Run from a fight? Just when I was starting to think you might be smart."

"Damn it, Dudley, run!" Harry spun away from the light-bearer, his wand pointing at the Death Eater nearest his cousin. "Stupefy!"

The Death Eater spun out of the way and the curse struck the mirror, shattering it into a thousand glittering splinters.

Dudley dove forward, hit the ground in a roll, and came up swinging. His fist impacted the jaw of the Death Eater that had invited him to leave with a sickening crack almost as loud as if the man had Apparated. The Death Eater crumpled, but another just pointed his wand at Dudley.

"Stupefy!"

The red jet of light caught Harry's cousin in the chest, and he crumpled with a look of surprise on his round face.

Harry raised his wand, but before he could speak, he heard a voice from behind him.

"Reducto!"

It was as if someone had taken a hammer to the back of his knees; he felt the bone splinter as he was blown off his feet and into the air by the force of the spell. But before his body had touched the cool linoleum, he was caught by a second spell.

"Crucio!"

The curse tore at him, and his insides twisted as the pain rippled outwards from his center. He gasped for air and bit his tongue trying spit out the words for a spell, any spell. He didn't even remember hitting the ground.

A third voice.

"Crucio!"

Harry's consciousness narrowed until all he was aware of was pain; his blood was on fire and his bones seemed crack from the inside out. The agony consumed him to the point he didn't realize the hoarse scream echoing through the room had torn from his throat.

A fourth voice.

"Crucio!"

"No..." He heard himself whimper, but he was distanced from it, as if the voice wasn't his. The third Cruciatus Curse seemed to be trying to drive his mind and his body apart. His eyes and his ears both seemed to pop and he felt warm tears on his face, but he knew it was blood, not tears...

"No?" He heard the almost-familiar voice again. "Want something different?"

He heard the voice again, this time speaking rapid fire, but the pain from the Cruciatus was too much for him to understand. He felt the effects; Burning Hex after Burning Hex raked up and down his torso. He jerked with each one, a blossom of agony that only seemed to accentuate the pain from the twin Cruciatus curses.

"Like that, Potter?"

Harry heard the laughter...and a fifth voice.

"Reducto!"

A sixth.

"Reducto!"

A seventh.

"Reducto!"

Both his arms jerked, the bones snapping like twigs. The third curse slammed into his lower chest, and his entire body jerked as his bones shattered; it was like shards of glass, a thousand white-hot splinters shredding his guts.

The ragged scream of pain made the mirrors vibrate.

“Beautiful sound, isn’t it brother?” The first voice. The one he recognized.

After what seemed an eternity, they lifted the Cruciatus. He lay there, crumpled on the ground, his wand held limply in his hand.

The other Death Eaters laughed, and he heard other voices, casting other spells, barely feeling the fourth and fifth Reductor Curses hit his sides.

He convulsed, gagging, and spat out blood.

“Pario levin attono!”

A crackling bolt of blue light leapt from the wand of yet another Death Eater, wrapping him in lines of shocking heat; lightning sending his body into uncontrollable spasms. He swallowed blood, the hot-salty taste thick, like warm maple syrup. He choked again, hacking and gasping. Finally, he lay against the floor, his breathing short and ragged.

He heard them laughing softly. They were saying things. Mocking him, but the words didn’t make sense.

There was an insensible roar from somewhere, and he felt, rather than heard Dudley leap to his feet; the Stunner had less of an effect on someone of Dudley’s size and constitution. There was a grunt, and a faintsnap!

He heard a curse. “The bleedin’ Muggle broke me wand!”

Dudley laughed coldly. Harry was vaguely surprised to hear the depth of anger in Dudley's voice. "Cowards. You can't do anything without those...things...can you?"

In a moment of blinding insight, Harry realized the Death Eaters had made several fundamental mistakes. The first was taking the time to torture him. Every minute they spent there was a minute more the Order had to come for him.

The second mistake was worse. All his life, Dudley Dursley had been good at one thing (other than eating twice his weight in junk food): hitting people. He had perfected it to an art, and had now spent half a summer training in nothing but how to hit people harder, faster, better.

And for the first time in his life, he could hit people with impunity. Neither his father, the wizards protecting Harry, or Muggle authorities would be upset with him for hitting these people. From the sounds of fist impacting flesh, Dudley was taking substantial advantage of the situation.

Unfortunately, the Death Eaters had no respect for any Muggle, let alone Harry's rotund cousin. They just kept firing spells at him and he just kept hitting them.

He could just hear their excuses to Voldemort..."I'm sorry, my Lord...who knew Muggles had arms? And knew how to use them?"

Harry bit his lip, holding back another whimper of pain as he tried to push himself up into a sitting position, but his arms wouldn't support the weight.

But he could see the mirrors.

Dudley ducked under a Stunner, his meaty fists lashing out like a pair of rapid-fire pistons, sending two of the Death Eaters sprawling, their masks cracked. Blood seeped out from between the cracks.

Dudley's fists, face and shirt were covered with splashes of blood – and none of it was his.

A Death Eater moved in close, trying to get him from behind, but Dudley spun, his elbow slamming into the Death Eater's face with staggering force, the sickening crunch and sudden flow of blood proof that the man's nose was shattered. He dropped to the floor, and Dudley kicked him in the ribs and the stomach and then finally the head.

Like a raging bull elephant, Dudley waded into some of the worst wizards alive, and began the process of beating them all into bloody pulps.

He had spent every evening sparring with Harry, who had used his speed to good advantage; none of the Death Eaters were nearly as fast as Harry, and Dudley contemptuously side stepped their pitiful attempts to hold him at bay. Every time he heard someone cry out a spell, he rolled away, and the spell missed.

Through his pain induced fog, Harry realized a serious flaw in Wizard fighting - you almost always knew what your opponent was going to do.

Despite Dudley's physical power, his cousin was beginning to flag, though more than half the Death Eaters were down for the count.

But there was no sign of reinforcements.

Where is the Order? Don't they know what's happening? He felt strangely detached from himself. Almost as if he were floating. Only the pain seemed to remind him he was still himself. Still connected.

He remembered the darkness. The Order couldn't see in the windows! He had to do something...

His mind seemed to slide along, bouncing from thought to thought. He had to focus.

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing.

The pain was unbelievable. Hot knives slipped through his lungs, slicing his insides. He wanted to scream, but he didn't. He couldn't.

Blood gurgled in his throat.

He forced himself to breath.

In.

Out.

Slowly, he gained control of his thoughts, pushing the pain to a distant corner of his mind.

And he curled his fingers around his wand. Their third mistake. They had left him his wand. The wand that had seen him through so many battles. The brother wand to Voldemort's.

A wand that meant he was expected to do great things.

He closed his eyes...there was only one spell he could remember right then...his mind felt scattered, his thoughts twisting with the pain. But he only needed one spell...something bright...to attract attention. To drive back the darkness.

He thought of his father; he thought of his mother. He had seen them, in the Mirror of Erised, and again, in the photo album Hagrid had given him. And later, he had helped draw them from Voldemort's wand, that night in the graveyard. They had spoken to him...their voices comforting him, warming him, supporting him as he dueled Voldemort.

He rasped out the words, blood bubbling up in his mouth.

"Expecto...patronum...!"

There was a flash of silver, and a brilliant stag burst from the tip of his wand. In the remaining mirrors, Prongs was reflected until he shone brighter than the sun. Shards of glass on the ground glittered brightly.

Dudley looked up, remembering the stag from the past summer. It had saved him from the darkness Harry had called 'Dementors'.

Running straight at one of the Death Eaters, it ran through the dark-clad man and out into the street.

There was a pause, as if the battle had stopped and taken a breath.

Harry heard a deep voice...he thought he knew a name...Shacklebolt...

“STUPEFY!”

“EXPELLIARMUS!”

He heard the footsteps, the screams. Saw flashes of light and color flashing overhead, voices bellowing...Prongs standing over him, a silent guardian of impossibly brilliant silver light...

“Father?” He lay back and tried to reach up to the stag, but his arm wouldn’t move. “Please...”

Please save me. Don’t leave me.

He heard his cousin kneel down next to him. “Come on, Harry, get up! We have to get you to the hospital...you’re bleeding...please...”

“No.” He croaked the word. Blood drooled down his chin and cheek. No hospitals. No doctors. He looked up and stared the stag in the eye, and he swore he saw something there...

Dudley seemed near hysterical. “Okay, whatever, we’ll go home, just please, get up...!”

Home.

He tried to think of home. But he couldn’t see a house...or a place...he saw a warm fire...the smell of fresh-baked bread...bright orange rooms...red-hair...soaring through the air.

Flying. Wings of red; wind through his hair. A small hand clasped in his own...

Home.

He reached his hand out to the stag.

I want to go home.

The world disappeared in a haze of silver light.

End Chapter

Revised 12-25-07

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Suffocating Silence

Ginny awoke to silence.

She lay and listened to the quiet that had settled over the Burrow. The silence seemed to be a sound in and of itself, as if the absence of sound would deafen her by smothering her in a heavy blanket.

Her door creaked open, almost painfully loud in the silence. She was suddenly aware of Hermione's soft breathing, of Ron's footsteps as he tried to sneak into her room. She smiled a bit to herself.

He always came to check on her when he woke up before she did. It had become a habit the summer after her first year, when her nightmares had been so bad she wouldn't be able to wake on her own. She peeked out from under her eyelids, watching him look at Hermione curled around a pillow (Ginny hadn't had the heart to tell Hermione it was one she had stolen from Ron weeks ago) and his blue eyes sparkled for a brief moment.

She giggled at the dreamy expression on her brother's face.

He shrugged. "She drives me crazy, you know."

"I know." She sat up, swinging her legs out of bed. "I'm going down for some tea. You want to stay with her?"

Ron turned a brilliant shade of red and mumbled something. Ginny kissed her brother on the cheek and dashed out of the room so her laughter wouldn't wake Hermione.

But her laughter died as she stepped back out into the quiet.

It's no wonder Ron woke up...the quiet doesn't feel right.

She walked into the kitchen, knowing her mother would scold her for not bothering with a dressing gown. She almost hoped to hear her

mother's raised voice. "Ginevra Weasley, you go right back upstairs and get decent this instant!"

She would snort, and cross her arms and tap her foot. "I am decent, mum. See – t-shirt and shorts are decent. Not like what Hermione wears to bed!"

Her mother, at least, would giggle at that – Hermione's satin nightgowns were a source of great amusement (and envy) for Ginny and no small embarrassment for Hermione.

Oh, she's going to kill me later today.

Right then, she understood Rita Skeeter's choice of Animagus forms. She would have paid good money to be a fly – or beetle - on the wall when Hermione woke to find Ron watching her sleep.

Her mother wasn't up yet, but there was an abandoned teapot on the stove – which was still on. Meaning one of her brothers was already up. She grabbed a mug and poured the last of the tea into it and turned off the stove.

Pilfered tea in hand, she walked out back, hoping the quiet wouldn't be as deafening outside. Even Tonks – normally as boisterous and mischievous as the twins – was sleeping peacefully on the couch.

Bill was standing by the patio table in the middle of the backyard, staring up at the sun, a half-smile on his face.

"Morning, imp."

She rolled her eyes at him as she walked out to join him, the grass tickling her bare legs and feet. "You left the stove on, lout."

"Course I did. Knew you'd turn it off when you got up."

She sniffed at him, cradling the warm mug between her hands. She and Mum both had cold hands – and Ginny was infamous for torturing her poor brothers with icy fingers.

She shivered, thinking idly that the weather forecast was off; the morning was supposed to have been unseasonably warm, but it was rather chilly.

Hermione's right. Divination is a load of rubbish, even when it comes to figuring out the weather.

She didn't let herself think about the Prophecy.

"You okay?" Bill put a hand on her shoulder.

Ginny looked up at the man who was undeniably her favorite brother, and sighed.

"Stop being a mind-reader. I'd like to mope in peace for once."

He grinned at her. "Where's the fun in that?"

She took a sip of her tea and grimaced at the bitter taste. "Ugh. You used the cheap stuff again, didn't you?"

"Sorry, imp. It's what I'm used to. There's not much call for weak or fancy tea out in the middle of a desert. Or jungle. Or wherever Gringotts sends me."

Ginny glared at him. "Doesn't mean you should torment the rest of us." She saw the wistful look on his face, and her expression softened. "You miss it, don't you?"

He chuckled. "Yeah. But in some ways, this is infinitely better, because for once I'm fighting for a reason other than money. It's got a nice, conscience-clearing feel to it." He poked her. "Besides, I get to keep an eye on you, make sure you behave."

She kicked at him half-heartedly. "Just try it, you great oaf."

"Feisty for this time of morning, aren't we?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "It's not that early. Besides, what are you doing up? You don't work today."

Bill shrugged and took a deep swallow of tea. "Setting wards. The Order wanted me to put to use what I've learned breaking them."

"I'm glad. Maybe I'm biased, but I trust your skill more than anyone except maybe Dumbledore."

Her brother raised an eyebrow at the venom in her voice when she said the Headmaster's name. "Still mad at him?"

"Yes!" Ginny hissed. "I am."

Bill nodded. "Because you're worried about Harry?"

Ginny stared down at her toes and nodded. "More than I want to admit."

"Never went away, did it?"

Ginny frowned into her mug. "What? My crush? No. It just got worse. And dating other guys didn't help...it was bad, Bill, really bad. I kept comparing them to him."

He shook his head. "Damn me, imp, if you aren't in up to those ears of yours. And heaven help the boy once he finally opens his eyes."

Ginny grumbled under her breath. "Just what is wrong with my ears?"

Of all her brothers, Bill had always simply accepted her feelings for Harry, never teasing or prodding her. He also held steadfast to the belief that Harry was young – and his life such a mess – that he wasn't thinking about romance or relationships, not really anyway, and that as soon as he was, he would wake up and come around.

At least someone believes I have a chance.

Bill was right. She did miss him. Every day. All the time. Ever since she was ten.

She took another sip of the tea, despite the taste; it, at least, was warm.

This is just Mum getting revenge for me not wearing a dressing gown. Just wait. It'll be her fault it's cold today.

The air seemed heavy and it was getting colder. She looked over at their grandfather's shed, watching as frost grew on the windows.

Bill stepped away from her, setting his mug on the table. He drew his wand.

"Inside, Ginny. Now."

She looked up, opening her mouth to protest, but the entire world seemed to lurch.

The air in front of her shimmered, coalescing into a curtain of writhing silver; from it burst a streak of liquid light. A massive stag, head held high, horns shedding streaks of fluorescence, raced into being in an incandescent explosion.

It seemed to be too cold and too hot at once. The air crackled and the Burrow shook with a silent thunderclap as the stag glided to a stop inches from her nose.

Stumbling backwards, she cried out incoherently. Snorting, it pawed the ground.

Sparks fluttered across her vision; she tried to blink them away.

"Father...don't leave me..."

The raspy voice gurgled with the effort of speech. Breath hissed around coagulated blood...but it was as familiar to her as breathing.

The majestic stag faded away, leaving the broken and bloody body of Harry Potter curled at her bare feet.

Bill stared in shock as Ginny stumbled back, her mug falling from her numb fingers, tumbling to the ground and shattering. She fell to her knees by his head, reaching out for him. He convulsed, blood seeping from the corner of his mouth. She heard herself whispering as her fingers touched his face, but couldn't remember what she said.

He was shaking, trying to curl around himself. "...please...don't leave me..."

His head brushed her bare leg, and he sucked in air at the contact. His hand reached for her as he tried to cling to her but his fingers wouldn't work. She tried to pull him closer; he flinched and jerked away from her hands, but he still clutched at her shirt.

Bill looked down at his sister and then at Harry. Something hardened in his eyes as he seemed to make a decision. "Got your wand, imp?"

He spoke casually, but his voice was different...distant, somehow, as if he were focused on something only he could see.

The wards. He can feel the wards. Whatever did this to Harry is coming after him.

Ginny shook her head, too scared to be mad at herself. "Upstairs in my room."

Bill nodded again, looking resigned. "Stay with him. No matter what, don't try to help me."

Ginny looked at her brother, icy tendrils of fear crawling through her.

She nodded.

Bill closed his eyes and his wand snapped up and he drew three quick circles of light the air.

He chanted liquid syllables that seemed to hang in the air like sharp-edged fragments of power, leaving her hair standing on end.

As he spoke, the circles flew through the air, wrapping around the Burrow.

The silence grew so heavy Ginny wondered why she wasn't suffocating.

Bill's eyes resumed the faraway look and he muttered under his breath. "Stay in silence and ease thy burdens; thine blood be safe; see and hear not what will trouble thy souls."

Ginny looked at her older brother as if seeing a stranger. The early morning sun shone down on him, and he smiled up at it, almost as if he were greeting it. He was dressed in trainers, worn jeans and a white t-shirt; his long hair was in a sloppy pony tail, but he reminded her of Dumbledore; something in his stance or in the aura around him.

He didn't look at her when he spoke.

"They're safe now, little sister, but only if we don't cross the threshold."

She nodded. Bill left it unspoken, but they were not safe. She didn't know how he knew, but she trusted her brother. Of all her family, he had never lied to her, or sugar-coated anything.

As if suddenly afraid, Harry pulled himself closer to Ginny, using his elbows to drag himself along the ground. His eyes were unfocused; his glasses were nowhere in sight. The air seemed to shimmer around him, flashes of green light dancing like miniature lightning in a corona around him.

He rested his head in her lap, releasing a long, shaky breath. Ginny couldn't look away; her hands moved of their own accord, brushing his hair away from his forehead.

Harry's scar was inflamed, red, and oozing blood.

Harry shifted against her, his skin cold and clammy on her leg. He was trying to speak again, but the words sounded thick in his mouth.

“...sorry...couldn’t fight...just wanted to come...home.”

Strangely calm, Ginny stroked his hair, leaning over him as if to shelter him. She felt a wrenching guilt at the small part of her that screamed in joy that coming here, to the Burrow, was coming home to him.

“You’re home...you’re home...you don’t have to fight...”

She felt him sapping warmth from her, and this time when she tried to pull him closer, he let her. He curled against her, blood smearing on her leg.

“Ginny...?” When he rasped her name, she hushed him with a finger on his bloodstained lips.

“I’m here. Don’t speak...just rest. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Harry’s other hand reached up, but his arm didn’t want to support the hand; Ginny caught it in hers and held it. His other hand had his wand in a death grip, the muscles having tightened to the point she wasn’t sure he could have let go, even if he wanted to.

“...hurts...” He twisted his body, and cried out. His eyes met hers, and for a brief second of lucidity, he seemed to see her. “Please...don’t let go?”

It tore at her when she heard him whisper those words as a question, not a plea...almost as if he feared that because he asked she would let go.

“I’m not letting you go, Harry Potter.”

He coughed, turning his head; blood splattered on the ground. With a groan, he lay there, panting.

He sagged against her, the last of his strength expended.

Pressure seemed to build around them like the threat of thunder. The air was tinged with the scents of ozone and blood.

Ginny could see faint flashes of light just outside of her vision as the ward struggled against whatever was coming. She knew enough about wards to know they were weaker than they should have been. Whatever had brought Harry to them had weakened the wards, leaving the Burrow vulnerable.

Ginny looked back at her brother.

His face was calm, but beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as he silently struggled to hold the wards.

“They’re coming though,” he whispered. The magic made manifest hit the air like a hammer blow, and the wards fell. Harry cried out in pain.

CRACK!

It sounded like a thunderclap. Nine Death Eaters Apparated in at once. Their wands were held warily out, as if they were waiting for something that never came.

The cold grew worse, and she felt even the flicker of hope drain out of her as black shadows hovered in the air behind the Death Eaters, growing closer with every second.

Dementors...

Bill walked a single step forward.

He seemed casual, calm – but his eyes were colder than Ginny had ever seen him.

A slow anger replaced the chill in his eyes, and he looked up at the Dementors, his wand coming up as if in slow motion.

“Sum est al khenim Ra!” Bill’s voice echoed, and the air stilled. The sun seemed to flare brighter, and a shimmering wall of heat sprang up between the Burrow and the Dementors. The scent of hot sand

washed over her, along with a wave of warmth. The Dementors floated back, haunted howls echoing as they vented their rage.

A hint of relief passed over Harry's face as the heat washed over them.

Bill faced the Death Eaters. They seemed to be moving in slow motion, dragging their wands up even as Bill was casting.

"Ras'en to'liat!" He made a slashing motion with his wand, a streamer of violet light streaking through the air. The streak expanded, and slid through the wall of heat. Like a whip, it struck across two of the Death Eaters, throwing them to the ground, binding them under a net of violet filaments. A third dove out of the way, but Bill flicked his wand, almost dismissively.

A blue flash of light exploded in front of the Death Eater, and he dropped to the ground, lines of electricity running over his body. Another quick motion, and ropes wrapped around him, binding him to the ground.

The Death Eaters hurled spells, but they splashed harmlessly against the shield in a blinding display of prismatic pyrotechnics.

Moving only his arm and his wand, Bill pointed at the remaining Death Eaters, muttering under his breath. The incantation was longer, but the effect was nothing short of spectacular.

The ground beneath their feet seemed to turn to liquid, bucking and rolling like the seas and high tide. Stumbling and falling, the Death Eaters were wrapped in cocoons of earth.

Ginny tore her eyes from her brother and looked down at the wizard in her lap. He was once again curled into a fetal ball, and was clutching helplessly at his scar, his wand forgotten on the ground.

"No...you can't..."

She was rocking him like a child, murmuring in his ear, begging him to stay with her. Somehow she knew if he closed his eyes, she would lose him.

His eyes widened, looking at something only he could see, and his hand reached up and pushed her arms with desperate strength. "Let me go! He can't take you too!"

She looked down into his eyes, and was drawn into green fire.

...She stood above his body again, blood pooled at her feet. Her wand was in her hand, and she was in her Hogwarts robes – the same ones she had worn her first year.

In front of her, smiling rakishly, Tom Riddle shook his head.

"Such a dear, dear boy. He really musn't be so rude as to refuse my invitation."

Ginny stepped over him, protecting him with herself. "Leave him alone, Tom. I'm not eleven anymore."

Tom laughed. "No, Snapdragon, you're certainly not."

She winced at the use of his pet name for her. He smiled warmly, and kept laughing as if they had just shared a private joke.

"I'm not going to kill him, Ginnevrá. Really now! Why would I do that now that I have him at my feet, where he properly belongs?"

Tom raised his wand and pointed at Harry.

"Crucio!"

Harry's body convulsed, and he screamed. It tore through her, and she snapped her wand up and around. "Protego!"

Nothing happened; Harry still twisted and writhed at her feet, her Shield Charm useless against Riddle.

Shadows gathered around him like a cloak, and his handsome face changed with those shadows; pale, thin, snake-like...glowing red eyes boring into her.

“Step aside, girl. He is mine.”

He held his wand casually, keeping the Curse on Harry with negligent ease.

“His mind is mine. His body is broken. His soul is empty, and he is alone. You will turn away, and leave him to me.”

Ginny raised her head and met those glowing eyes. “No.”

He twisted his wand, and Harry screamed again, his muscles seizing hard enough he was practically lifted from the ground.

“Give him to me, or I will not stop until I have destroyed him. I will drive his mind and his body apart...he will be a gibbering, delirious invalid. Would you wipe the drool from his chin? Change his diapers?”

“Leave. Him. Alone.” Ginny stared at Voldemort, her wand pointed straight out at him, willing him away from Harry.

He lifted the curse from Harry and pointed his wand at her, and his voice hissed. “Imperio!”

For a brief second, Ginny felt like she was floating, drifting away...but she bit her lip hard enough to make it bleed, snapping her back to reality so hard her head spun.

Idiot girl! She scolded herself, raising her Occlumency against Voldemort.

“You have grown stronger, haven’t you, Snapdragon?” Voldemort chuckled, his features shifting between the Dark Lord and Tom Riddle.

“Fiat Inferno!” Ginny slashed her wand side to side, a wall of fire erupting between Voldemort and her and Harry.

She ducked down below it, her wand held ready. She gripped Harry's hand. "I'm still here. I'm not going anywhere!"

"Finite Incantatem." The Dark Lord's voice hissed, and the flames vanished, but Ginny was ready for him.

"Reducto! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!" She spat spells rapid-fire, but Voldemort waved them away as if they were flies.

"Relashio!" He pointed at Harry, a streak of fire lancing towards the half-conscious boy.

Harry's eyes flashed with green light and he gasped out: "Protego!"

The air around Harry flared green and the shield snapped into existence.

As the bolt of fire reflected back at Voldemort, the Dark Lord whirled away, appearing to their side.

Even as he raised his wand, Ginny struck first. "Pario Levin attono!"

The lightning bolt caught the Dark Lord's wand hand. He snarled in pain, but waved off the electricity.

"Oh my, Snapdragon. Did I not tell you that you had power?"

He gestured with his wand, and Harry's body rose into the air. He twisted his wrist, and Harry's body bent backwards. She could hear popping noises and could see his mouth forced open in a rictus of pain.

Ginny leapt between Harry and Voldemort, putting herself in front of the Dark Lord's wand. Her own wand slashed up and across, an arc of violet light splitting the air.

The Dark Lord blinked.

Harry fell to the ground with a dull thud. He raised his head and held out his wand. "Expecto Patronum!"

Once again, Prongs leapt into being, charging straight at the Dark Lord; shining brighter than the sun...she had to look away or be blinded.

Harry fell to the ground with a cry and a heavy thud. She was on her knees next to him.

Her wand was in her hand.

He was once again holding his wand, and green light was fading from around him.

He looked at her, and tried to smile. She tried to smile back, helping him lay back in her lap.

"I'm sorry...just...wanted it to stop." He sucked in air and convulsed, whimpering. "...wanted to go home...so tired..."

"We beat him, Harry...he's gone..."

He curled tighter against her, pulling himself up so his head was pressed against her stomach

She shivered at the chill in the air, and looked over at her brother. Bill barely spared them a glance; his eyes were locked on the Dementors as they tried to break through the shield he'd erected. Lines of frost seemed to creep along the edges of it and spread, like cracking glass, across its surface as their scabrous hands pressed against it.

They howled, the spectral notes vibrating her bones.

Why doesn't he cast the Patronus Charm?

Bill held his wand up, his mouth moving in voiceless incantations. Sweat ran down his face, but he didn't blink. He didn't move. The ground at his feet had changed; instead of dirt and grass, there was a perfect circle of golden sand.

In the distance, just past edge of the Burrow's backyard, there was a flash of fire and a man stood, his features blurred by the shield.

"Expecto Patronum!"

The voice held an echo of power Ginny had never dared to imagine. It reverberated through air and the ground. Waves of silver light pulsed out from the figure as he strode toward the Burrow.

Ginny blinked. She could barely see anything but the pulsating silver glow. Argent shadows shimmered around her, and the approaching figure seemed to be a silhouette outlined in silver fire.

The Dementors crumpled in midair, twisting and writhing as they withered away before her eyes. Trapped between Bill's shield and the Patronus Charm, the Dementors dissolved even as the silver light paled and faded away.

There was another flash of fire above them and Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, circled overhead, drifting down to land next to Harry. With a soothing trill, he sang softly – so softly only she and Harry could hear.

Peace fell over her; Fawkes met her eyes and she saw the despair and pain there...the Phoenix only wanted to ease his pain...tears ran down the red-gold feathers to splash on Harry's face, dribbling into his mouth...

Dumbledore gently pulled her away.

End Chapter

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Numb

Ron opened his eyes and realized he'd been asleep.

He didn't remember falling asleep. He remembered sitting on Ginny's bed and watching Hermione sleep, curled around his pillow. He remembered he had just wanted to see her. Just to have a moment alone and make sure she was okay.

When he awoke he was lying on Ginny's bed staring straight at the open door of Ginny's room. He couldn't move for a moment, as if his limbs had forgotten how.

He sat up and looked at Hermione. She was still asleep, lying on her side. She hugged his pillow to her, her face half-buried in it. Soft brown hair, free of pins and clips spilled over her shoulders and cheeks in a bushy mess he'd always found adorable.

Even asleep, she looks so intent. Intense. A brush of cold washed over the house, and Hermione shivered, burrowing deeper under her covers, making a soft sound of contentment.

He smiled to himself, knowing if any of his siblings saw the look on his face, he'd never live it down.

He could just see her indignant expression if she were to catch sight of him right then.

'Ronald Weasley, just what do you think you're doing, sitting there and staring at me?'

He might even have a chance to respond before she continued scolding him, but he'd either stutter and turn as red as his hair, or his mouth would disengage from his brain and he'd say something stupid.

I always say something stupid. That's why I should learn to leave the talking to her.

Though, sometimes, saying something stupid was easier than telling the truth. 'Yes, Hermione, one of my favorite pastimes is sitting and watching you.' Or worse: 'I was watching you sleep...and you're beautiful. Even if I could have, I didn't want to look away.'

There was only one thing to do, really. All he'd have to do was speak first – and then duck. Hopefully, she'd be groggy enough right after she woke up for him to get the first word in, because he knew she'd get the last word in. She always did.

He'd have his say, then accept whatever she dished out. Things were going to be different between them. He was going to make sure of it.

Ron started when he heard the stairs creak as someone trudged upstairs. Is Ginny back already?

He crept to the door and leaned his head out to see a man carrying a limp, black-clad body in his arms. He didn't recognize the man at first. He was tall and lanky, and wore a long dark gray tunic, sturdy hiking trousers and boots; he had a worn brown leather satchel slung over one shoulder, hanging low against one hip. His long silver hair was tied back into a long tail with a series of leather thongs and hung past his hips. There was a polished walking staff of white wood slung across his back.

He carried the body with ease and he moved with strength and confidence that belied the age his silver hair seemed to indicate.

He had a long nose that had been broken more than once supporting wire-frame glasses and a silver beard almost as long as his hair, but braided and decorated with beads and what looked to be bright red feathers.

Professor Dumbledore?

As soon as he had the unlikely thought, he knew he was right. But it was hard to picture this Dumbledore as his Headmaster. He was still Dumbledore, but also seemed to be a different person entirely.

A second suspicion, one that seemed just as unlikely as the first, slithered into the back of his mind.

Expressionless, he stared at the body in Dumbledore's arms.

I miss the days when I was always wrong.

Harry was covered in blood and bruises and burns. His arms and legs hung at unnatural angles, and his breath rasped and gurgled. But his wand, stained with blood, was clasped tightly in his hand.

Ron dashed across the hall and opened the door to his bedroom, closing Ginny's door behind him. He started lighting candles, as if enough light would somehow change the situation.

"Thank you, Mister Weasley." Dumbledore tried to smile, but failed.

Ron just stared at the body of his friend as Dumbledore laid him on his bed. Even unconscious, Harry groaned at the pain.

"I'll get Mum." It seemed the most logical thing to do. Someone was hurt – his mother had always patched people up when they were hurt. He didn't want to even think that Harry might be beyond her skills.

"I'm already here, dear." His mother came bustling into the room, followed by Fawkes. She saw Harry and her lips thinned. "Go downstairs and take care of your sister."

Ron looked sharply at his mother. "What's wrong with Ginny?"

"She is physically fine, Mister Weasley," Dumbledore said, pulling his wand from his satchel. "However, Harry's arrival was more traumatic for her than it was for you. She and your brother William were successful in fighting off a few Death Eaters and Dementors, and they are no worse for the wear. Your sister, however, seems to be in a bit of shock and likely needs some brotherly support right now."

Ron stood his ground. "What happened?"

“Ronald! Downstairs, now!” His mother barked. “Or make yourself useful and get a basin of warm water and my antiseptic.”

Without another word, Ron dashed into the bathroom and filled a metal basin from the tap, grabbed several washcloths, towels, bandages, and the rest of his mother’s traditional medical supplies.

Where are my feelings? Why am I so numb? He wanted to be angry, to be sad, to cry, to scream – anything. Instead, there was nothing. He couldn’t get the image of his best friend’s body lying limp on his bed out of his mind.

He ducked back into his room, careful not to slosh the water, and pulled a small table he usually used for comics and Chudley Cannon paraphernalia over to Harry’s bedside. He swept the table clean and set out the supplies as Dumbledore used his wand to remove the scorched remains of Harry’s shirt.

Ron bit back a curse when he saw the mottled black bruising and hundreds of tiny cuts and welts decorating Harry’s pale skin. Ron could literally count Harry’s ribs he was so thin.

“Ron?” A sleepy voice called from the doorway. He looked up just in time to see Hermione see Harry.

She put her hand to her mouth, a faint gasp mingling with a whimper. He darted away from Harry’s bedside and over to her, putting arm around her waist and leading her out.

“Come on. They’ve got him. Mum and Dumbledore will put him right. You’ll see.”

She leaned against him, trying to stare over his shoulder, but he was so much taller he was able to block her view. She was crying silently and shaking against him.

“Hermione...come on. Ginny needs us.” He tugged at her gently, leading her away as he closed the door behind him. She clung to him as he took her downstairs.

Ginny was curled up in an armchair next to the fire, staring blankly at nothing. She was smeared with Harry's blood, and she was hugging her knees to her chest. Bill and Tonks were on the couch nearest the stairs. Tonks was deliberately not looking at Bill, though Bill kept looking at Tonks. They both seemed to be waiting for the other one to say something.

Ron led Hermione over to the couch nearest Ginny and sat down next to her. She leaned against him, burying her face in his shoulder. Feeling awkward, not at all knowing how to comfort her, he put his arms around her and let her press close to him and cry herself out.

He opened his mouth to ask – again – what had happened, but his voice stuck on its way out of his throat.

Instead, he just stared at the tea service someone had set out for them. Tea was a Weasley tradition; when something went wrong, you drank tea. When you had to talk and you didn't want to, you drank tea. When you had to wait for bad news, you drank tea.

Ron didn't much feel like drinking tea.

- 0 -

Four hours could be a very long time.

They sat in the Burrow's cramped living room, and stared at tea growing cold on the coffee tables.

It seemed inconceivable that it wasn't even noon.

Each minute seemed to drag by, marked by the slow ticking of the Weasley family clock.

If he dies... Ron couldn't finish the thought. He hadn't been able to finish it since Dumbledore had silently carried Harry into his room.

He was trying not to stare at Ginny, still dressed in her bloodstained shorts and tank top. He saw her legs and hands were also smeared with Harry's blood, and the sight of it made him shiver. Once or twice,

someone had suggested she clean up, but she'd just stared blankly at them and silently refused to do so.

Hermione was still leaned against him, one of her arms wrapped around his arm holding her. He knew she was dozing off and on – which, coming from Hermione, meant she was more exhausted than he'd thought.

He let her sleep, even though he wanted her to be awake, to look around the room and pull the answers out of thin air. For her to have a flash of blinding, brilliant logic and figure out how to make everything better.

One by one, the 'higher-ranking' members of the Order found their way to the Burrow. Each one found an excuse to walk past the five of them gathered around the fireplace, their eyes both sympathetic and hard. Mostly, they eyed Ginny. Some of them even looked like they were going to stop and say something to her.

But Ron always stopped them with a glare before they could speak; the glare wasn't a threat. It was an unspoken statement that he would make a scene none of them wanted if they didn't leave his sister alone.

He wanted to do more than just glare. He wanted to demand someone tell him what happened. He wanted to scream at someone for what had been done to his best friend. But he didn't. He knew it wouldn't do any good.

It was their fault Harry was hurt. The Order was supposed to protect him, not let him end up like...that.

Death Eaters. Death Eaters came here. They followed Harry. Where was he last night? What happened to him?

He felt his anger building, but he ruthlessly suppressed it. There would be a time for anger, but this wasn't it.

He let Hermione sleep, left Ginny alone with her thoughts and let Bill and Tonks silently fight.

If this is maturity, I want a bloody recount. Being an immature git was so much more satisfying.

Eventually, Dumbledore came down the stairs.

He took off his satchel and set it beside the remaining armchair, then leaned his staff against the wall. Hermione seemed to know he was in the room, and opened her eyes, her expression making it seem she hadn't slept at all.

Dumbledore sat and looked at them.

His blue eyes had lost their familiar twinkle, and he regarded them all with a somber expression.

"Harry will be fine, given rest and time to recuperate. However, I imagine he will have as much opportunity to rest at his Aunt and Uncle's home as he would here. I will most likely be taking him back there shortly."

He waved his wand and the cold tea reheated. He helped himself to a cup, and took a small sip, and raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Ahh, this reminds me of my days in the field against Grindelwald. Strong, bitter tea was the order of the day." He took another sip.

Ginny shot an unreadable look and Bill, who shrugged. It was the first sign of life she'd shown since Ron had come downstairs.

He set the teacup down. "I must admit surprise none of you have more to say, or ask."

"Would you actually tell us the truth?"

Ron was surprised when he realized it was Hermione who had spoken.

If she's not gonna be the voice of reason, we're doomed.

Dumbledore's eyes went from person to person, as if asking them to speak.

"Shock," Ron muttered. "Isn't that what it's called when you just can't process anymore?"

"Indeed," Dumbledore answered, and leaned back in the chair. "But however shocking this may be, this might be your only opportunity to question me until the school term begins."

Ron shook his head. "It's not that easy, Professor. There's too much to consider to even start figuring out what questions I need to ask, let alone finding a way to ask them. I mean, no one but Ginny's heard from Harry all summer long. That's kinda normal, us not able to talk to him. I thought it was good, him talking to Ginny. I'm not always the best at this emotional stuff and Hermione was out and about. There was someone to help him deal. Maybe he could survive this summer.

"Except I find out Charlie – my own brother! – sold him out to the bloody Ministry, and he's trapped with his Aunt and Uncle for the whole summer. Then Hermione shows up in the middle of the night with Tonks and they tell us Harry's being kept in that cupboard again. That he's being beaten by his Uncle and his cousin and starved by his Aunt."

Ron couldn't stay seated anymore. He stood up, pacing in front of the couch.

"We were going to go get him, you know. Hermione had this elaborate plan even Professor Snape couldn't argue down. Only, Harry was missing. Charlie and Mum hinted at some kind of vision Fleur's had, and as usual, no one wanted to tell us what was going on. Even though we always figure it out anyway. Why not just save everyone the time, tell us everything, and tell us why you're doing what you're doing. It's piss-poor strategy to keep even the pawns unaware of what they're doing and why they're doing it."

Ron paused, almost as if he were realizing who he was talking to, but he kept pacing.

"I couldn't sleep last night. I couldn't get it out of my head that my best friend was living in hell, and I couldn't do a damn thing to help him. That no one was going to do a damn thing to help him."

He waved off anything Dumbledore might have tried to say. "Yeah, okay. He's supposed to be 'safe' there. Whatever. But this morning...I went go to check on Hermione." He looked over his shoulder at her, his voice softening. "I...I just wanted to make sure she was okay. She had to run away twice and all, you know?"

Uncomfortable at the way Hermione looked away from him, Ron looked back at Dumbledore.

"It was like I fell asleep, only I didn't. I'm a bloody wizard. I know when I've had a spell cast on me. I wake up and I see you carrying Harry, and he looks like he's dead. No one will bloody well tell me anything, but that's normal. The Order just stares at my sister like it's all her fault. After all, we don't know what we're doing. We're just kids. Now you come down here and tell me he's sort of but not really okay, but he has to go back there."

Ron stopped pacing and faced Dumbledore. He took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders.

"No." He shook his head. "No, sir. Professor. Last time he went there alone, he came back like...that. So I'm going with him. He'll not be alone there ever again."

Dumbledore actually looked surprised, but he ignored Ron, resting his eyes on Ginny.

"You have been in contact with Harry this summer, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny looked up at Dumbledore. Her expression was blank. "Yeah. Yeah, I have."

"We thought you knew," Bill spoke up. "Charlie even tried to get her to share the letters with the Order."

Frowning, Dumbledore took another sip of tea. "No, I have been out of touch lately. I know very little of what passed this summer." He kept staring at Ginny. "I do not know how, Miss Weasley, but you have managed to maintain contact with Harry without the Ministry being aware of it."

Ginny shrugged. "Hedwig always handled our letters."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very well. May I please see the letters from Harry?"

"No." Ginny shook her head. "You may not."

"Please, Miss Weasley, I believe they may be of some importance..."

"She said no." Ron stepped in front of Dumbledore again. "So stop asking."

"Ronald Weasley, sit down this instant!" Molly's strident shout cut through the air as she stormed down the stairs. "Your sister can speak for herself! And I would very much like to see the letters for myself! If they reveal anything of Harry's situation, you should have told someone!"

Ron bowed his head and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, but he didn't sit down.

"Ron's right. No. Stop asking." Ginny said. She looked gratefully at her brother, glad he was standing up for her. "Sorry, Mum. Even I know the people I could have told weren't going to do anything."

Dumbledore nodded, looking very troubled. "Very well. You understand that I will ask Harry when I take him back to the Dursleys?"

Ginny's hands gripped the sides of her chair. "What Harry chooses to or not to give you is his choice. This is mine."

Ron crossed his arms over his chest. "No. You won't ask him. And I already told you. I'm going with him."

Dumbledore, still ignoring Ron, turned in his chair to face Molly. "How soon will he wake?"

Molly shook her head. "A few hours, at the earliest. He's taken quite a bit, Albus, and some of it isn't even healed yet!"

Dumbledore nodded. "That is...unfortunate."

"Unfortunate, Albus?" Molly asked, her voice beginning to rise.

"Unfortunate that I might have to take him back injured or unconscious. But unless I am given good reason, he must go back."

"You're not taking him back there when he's unconscious." Ron said calmly, his eyes flickering violet in the reflected orange light of the fire.

Dumbledore sighed, ignoring Ron once again. "Molly, I will need you to keep working on him, to do as much for him as you can until it is time for me to take him."

"I may not like how Ron spoke to you, Albus, but I must agree. Harry should not go back there, much less alone! I will not allow it! He's been abused! What more reason do you need?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Molly, regardless, I will need you to keep working on him, to do as much for him as you can until it is time for me to take him."

"You certainly don't need to tell me what I need to do to take care of a hurt boy, Albus Dumbledore," Molly said with as much dignity as she could muster. "But you will not take him back there."

She turned around walked out of the room.

Ron looked like he was going to step in front of Dumbledore again, but Bill shook his head at his brother.

Trembling with rage, Ron turned to Ginny, kneeling in front of her. He rested his hands over hers. He was very aware of Harry's dried blood touching his skin. "You need me here?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, I'll be okay. I won't let them leave without you. Or me."

"Thanks." Ron stood back up and looked over at Dumbledore. "Since no one else cares I'm here, I've got work to do."

He stalked outside, but to everyone's surprise, he closed the door lightly behind him.

He didn't see Hermione watching him go.

"Happy now?" Ginny asked Dumbledore.

"No, Miss Weasley, I am not." He bowed his head, cradling his teacup in his hands. "And you are not nearly as angry with me as you should be. Or will be." Again, he set his teacup down. "I must know exactly what transpired this morning, Miss Weasley."

Ginny shrugged. "Fine. Ask me."

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "Ahh, if only words were but flowers to be plucked from the mind's garden...but they are not. I must see through your eyes, Ginevra. There is a spell that will allow me to do just that, but does so by granting me access to your thoughts."

Ginny hugged her knees to her chest. "So you can rifle through my brain until you find out what was in those letters? I don't think so."

"I give you my word, my oath as a Wizard and as the nominal leader of the Order of the Phoenix that I will only view the events that transpired this morning."

Ginny didn't say a word.

"As difficult as it may be for you, Ginevra, I need you to trust me."

She stared at the Headmaster long and hard, refusing to look away from his eyes.

“Will it help you help Harry?”

Dumbledore nodded. “The knowledge you have may very well make the difference between returning him to Privet Drive or allowing him to remain here.”

Ginny nodded. “All right then.”

Dumbledore pointed his wand at her. “Legilimens.”

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Ginny shakily crept into Ron’s room. She was shivering from a cold that was more inside than out, and her mind still ached, raw from Dumbledore’s Legilimency. He had tried to be gentle and careful, but Ginny had been possessed before and her mind gave up its secrets reluctantly.

The curtains were drawn tightly shut, and only a few candles were still burning. Usually the bright orange walls made the room look like it was on fire, but with the only light coming from the candle flames, it seemed to be smoldering.

She crept to the bed, and stood there a long moment, staring at him. He looked so...peaceful, asleep like that. The pain was gone from his gaunt face. He was still pale, and he was painfully thin. There were lines on his face that hadn’t been there when he’d left Hogwarts.

Ginny reached down to smooth those lines away. Was it her imagination, or did he seem to smile when her fingertips brushed his face?

She saw his hand still clutched his wand. It was streaked with blood, and the holly wood had lost its sheen.

“As he would not willingly release it, your mother and I thought it best to allow him to keep it.” Dumbledore spoke from behind her, closing

the door behind them. Fawkes flapped over to perch on the headboard above Harry's shoulder. "I must admit, Miss Weasley, that you have surprised me."

Ginny knew she should pull her hand away from Harry. But she didn't want to. "I do that. Just ask my brothers."

She didn't care how she had surprised Dumbledore. She just wanted him to leave. To give her just one moment alone with Harry.

I haven't been alone with him since the Chamber, have I?

She didn't want Dumbledore to see her cry. Or see how weak she was, to give in to a crush that would never be reciprocated. Just one moment. Is that too much to ask?

She heard Dumbledore walk further into the room. It was habit, to look away from whatever else had your attention and look at Dumbledore. He had that kind of presence, and was owed that kind of respect.

Ginny didn't look away from Harry. She didn't want to see what was in Dumbledore's eyes, see the reflection of what he had seen in her mind.

"You're going to take him away again, aren't you?"

"Yes," Dumbledore answered. "I am. He must return to Privet Drive. Conscious or not, I must take him back. I do not want to. I do not believe it is the right thing to do. I believe it is the best thing to do. I have not been given an alternative Harry can live with."

So you're going to take him away from me, too? She ran her hand down Harry's arm. A thousand different retorts hung on the tip of her tongue, but none of them would do any good.

She wasn't sure he would come back alive next time.

"Until I touched your thoughts, I did not realize the depth of the feelings you still hold for Harry."

She shrugged. That's none of your business! It's no one's business but mine! Why do all of you think what I feel, that what I want is yours to know and banter about as you please?

There's a part of her that wondered if she should have argued more with Dumbledore, but she knew she couldn't win an argument with the Headmaster, especially when she didn't have all the information. And if she'd tried, he might have taken away the single moment she might have.

Dumbledore sighed. "I will come for him later. I believe Fawkes wishes to remain with you for a time."

Ginny smiled bitterly. "Not like I have a choice." She left it unspoken. But you do.

She heard Dumbledore turn to leave. "Headmaster."

He stopped. "Yes, Miss Weasley?"

"I hope it's worth it. I hope what you've put him through and what he will have to go through is worth it."

Dumbledore opened the door. "Only time will answer such a thing, Miss Weasley, but it is a hope I fervently share."

The door shut behind him.

I don't care anymore. If I only get one moment, I'm going to make the best of it.

She climbed into the bed as slowly as she could, trying not to jostle him. Gently, she scooted down so that her leg was resting against his pillows – his head was nearly in her lap again.

Her hand moved of its own accord, trailing through his hair.

He almost died. The thought kept creeping into her head. He almost died in my arms.

She'd seen a glimpse of it in Dumbledore's mind. Just a faint flash as he had pulled away from her thoughts. Harry had come within inches of death, and it was only Fawkes' tears, Fawkes' continued affection for Harry, that had saved him this time. Dumbledore had provided Molly with several vials of Fawkes' tears to mix into potions for Harry. It was something Fawkes would do for no other but Dumbledore - and now Harry.

Harry had already recovered incredibly fast, and would keep recovering at an astounding rate thanks to the powers of Fawkes' tears. By the time he awoke (late that evening, Dumbledore surmised) he would be much better than he was now. And with each passing hour, he'd get better. He would be healed, but he would be weak.

He would be weak and back with the Dursleys.

Ginny smiled and touched his face with her fingertips, trying not to cry. He was alive. That was the important thing.

What is it with me? Why can't I be over this? Over him? Why do I have to feel this way about him?

She had tried to shut down the part of herself that felt those things, but it hadn't worked. He'd been so angry at them all...and then he'd hidden from them to protect them from himself. He was willing to sacrifice everything, even his own life, to save Sirius, but hadn't been willing to risk anyone else. He had been willing to allow Ron and Hermione to go with him because he knew they would have followed him regardless.

She had forced him to let the rest of them go. They had gone, but Sirius had still died.

He won't even tell us how much it hurts him. Or how scared he is. He'll just keep on trying to save all of us. Just like he saved me.

He kept trying to do what he knew was right, and he kept being punished for it.

How much can you take, Harry, until one day you aren't the person we all love?

She was afraid that this time he would wake up and wouldn't be able to be Harry anymore.

She wanted him to wake up and smile. She wanted him to have his one moment too – a moment where he could be truly, completely happy. Instead, he would wake up and have to face his relatives again. Again, he'd be alone, and there was nothing she – or anyone – could do about it.

Except Dumbledore.

She knew he might wake at any time, and would find her there. Feel her there. But she kept touching his face, his arms, his shoulders, his chest. Even if it was just for a moment.

The next time I see you, will you be so angry at the world you won't let anyone touch you?

She remembered last summer all too well. He'd been so very angry, at all of them. She knew the anger well; it was anger coming from hurt, from fear. From isolation. He'd been alone and left that way. All year long, she had wanted to go to him to hold him until he stopped fighting her, until he had to let some of that hurt out.

She hadn't. She'd been too scared he would turn her away. Instead, she'd played kissing games with Michael Corner.

Am I strong enough to let him know I'm here for him, even if he doesn't want me?

She didn't know the answer. All she knew is that if he woke up before Dumbledore took him away, he wouldn't wake up alone.

End Chapter

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Games of the Heart

Sweat rolled off his forehead and stung his eyes. The sun stung his bare, sunburned back, but he barely noticed. Each stroke of his arm scraped wood dust and peeling finish off the worn and stained surface of his parents' massive dresser.

He tried not to think or feel. He tried to concentrate on nothing more than what he was doing.

He was sanding. The dresser had been bought third-hand at a Hogsmeade community junk sale before Bill had been born, and was the first step in refinishing his parents' bedroom. He'd finished what he could do on the kitchen – at least without money and supplies – a week or so before. There was more to work with in his parents' room, and he was grateful for it. He had to stay busy. If he didn't he would start thinking again, and he was heartily tired of thinking. He wasn't nearly good enough at it, and it just complicated things. Being a clueless prat was so much easier.

Except being a clueless prat hurt Hermione so bad she didn't even want to read my letters.

He kept sanding. It was something he could do, and do well. He didn't have to think much. It just required muscles and sweat.

He didn't hear her walk up behind him.

"Ron?" Her voice was hesitant and quiet, as if not sure she should be there.

As if I don't want her here. The thought slipped through his rhythm and sparked another thought. I'm not sure I do. I'm not sure I want to share everything of me with her. If I can't hold something back, there will be nothing left of me when she goes back to him.

He looked up at her, caught by her brandy-brown eyes. She'd dressed in Muggle clothes; sneakers and jeans and a tank top. Her

hair was still an adorable mess, but her expression was scrunched up with worry.

“Yeah?” He had decided to try a new tactic with her. Say as little as possible – the fewer words he used, the less chance he had of saying something stupid.

She looked like she was about to say something, but stopped, reconsidering.

He shook his head. She was even afraid to talk to him now. “Whatever it is, just say it, ‘Mione. I promise I won’t get mad or yell or anything.”

She bit her lower lip and crossed her arms across her chest, as if unsure what to do with them.

“What are you doing out here?”

He shrugged, starting to sand again. “Trying to be productive while I stay out of the way.”

He heard her huff. “So instead of dealing with things, you run away and sulk?”

He forced his emotions down into the pit of his stomach. He wasn’t going to fight with her. I don’t think I can deal with her being angry at me anymore. I can at least have her not mad at me.

But could he really do anything about that now?

“If that’s the way you want to see, it, then yeah. I guess I did.” He applied a bit more force on a particularly rough spot. You don’t have to remind me I’m a coward, Hermione. I know I am.

He heard her shift her stance. “How should I see it then, Ron? Would you care to explain it to me?”

Ron sat back on his stool and kept working. See it any way you want. You always do. And no, I wouldn’t care to explain it to you.

If it were anyone else, he would have ignored them. But this was Hermione, and he had promised not to do anything to hurt her. He tried to find the right words, wishing, not for the first time, he knew how to talk to his best friend.

“Dumbledore didn’t want to hear what I had to say. Instead of causing a scene that would just get me yelled at, I decided to not cause problems that didn’t need to be caused and let Dumbledore concentrate on what he thought needed to be concentrated on. I came out here to work on this, ‘cause it’s doing something other than moping and getting bloody pissed about something no one will let me have a say in.”

She pulled up another stool and sat down. “I don’t believe you.”

Ron grit his teeth, clenching his jaw shut against the angry words threatening to break out. Despite everything I have done to you, I have never once lied to you, Hermione Granger. Why would I start now?

“Fine. Don’t.” He exerted every ounce of will he possessed to keep the hurt from his voice.

“You’re just going to come out here sulk and play with your toys instead of trying to get along with the grown-ups?” Her voice hadn’t increased much in volume but he could hear the tension in it warning him it wouldn’t be too long before he would be on the receiving end of a first-class scolding.

Might as well say it before she really gets going. This might be my last chance for awhile. He took a deep breath and forced the words out.

“I’m sorry, you know. I know I’m a prat when it comes to Victor. I won’t be that way anymore. I promise.”

“What?” she asked sharply.

Ron reached down to a bin next to his stool and pulled out a different sander. He needed a finer grain to smooth out what he'd just cleaned off.

"I'm sorry for being a prat about Victor. It's not fair of me, I don't have the right to, and I won't do it anymore. You're one of my two best friends and I don't like the idea I've done something to make you so upset you won't even answer a letter from me. It's part of what I was gonna say this morning when I went to check on you. I'm saying it now, before I lose the chance to."

To his surprise, Hermione was silent for a long time – long enough for Ron to finish the side he was working on and move to the front – which meant moving his stool closer to her.

"This morning...were you really in Ginny's room to look after me?" She sounded almost scared – either of what she was asking or what his answer might be.

He nodded. "Yeah. I'm worried about you. You were pretty upset last night."

He sounded gruffer than he wanted, but at least it was better than he would have done just a few weeks before. "I figured you wouldn't say anything if no one asked you, and I wanted to let you know I was here for you before you transfigured me into something soft and squishy."

"Why would I do something like that?" Hermione sounded like she was trying not to sound amused.

"I dunno." Ron took a rag and wiped the dust away from the dresser. "That letter you wrote...you seemed pretty put out with me."

If he had been able to force himself to look at her, he would have seen her staring at her feet. "It's okay. I...I just didn't want to hear it from you, about me going to Bulgaria. I didn't know where else to go, after I left my parents. And Dumbledore said I could go help the Order..."

He nodded and tried not to wince. I wish you'd thought you could have come here...to me, instead of going to him. He was a little surprised how deep the hurt ran that she hadn't thought of his home as being safe.

Why would she? It's hardly Malfoy Manor. He was rarely embarrassed about where he lived, but he didn't like feeling like it wasn't good enough for her. But why would she come to him when she felt so much more for Victor; when Victor had so much more to offer her?

"You're always welcome here. Or anywhere else I am. No matter what."

"I know." She was talking even quieter now. "But I needed to go to Bulgaria. There was a lot that needed doing there."

Ron nodded and sat back down, sanding at a rough spot. "They made you a member of the Order, then?"

"What? How did you...?" She was spluttering. Even with everything that had happened, everything she'd said, she hadn't expected him to make that leap. She knew he would know she had been helping the Order, but she had been counting on Ron not figuring out they'd made her a member.

"Easy," Ron answered. "You're Hermione."

"What do you mean by that?" She snapped back.

Ron was surprised at how upset she sounded. "You're Hermione. Smartest witch I know, powerful, and I've never seen any problem or situation get the best of you. You've figured out stuff Dumbledore and the rest have spent a lot of work hiding, and you probably know more about fighting You-Know-Who than some Aurors. The Order'd be daft not to want you."

"You're not mad, then?" She was on the edge of her stool, her legs facing his side.

“No. You deserve this. I’m proud of you, happy for you – not mad at you.”

“Thank you, Ron.” Hermione scooted even closer to him. “You shouldn’t be working out here without a shirt, you know. You’re going to get sunburned.”

“I’m already sunburned, and it’s too bloody hot to wear a shirt. So, you gonna tell me what happened after I threw my little fit and stormed out? Or maybe what all of happened this morning?”

Hermione sighed and rested her elbows on her knees. She didn’t know much; she only knew what she’d managed to overhear while Dumbledore had legilimenced Ginny. “I don’t understand all the details, not really, but the gist of it is Harry was attacked by Death Eaters at the gym he and his cousin train at. We still don’t know where he was last night, but Professor Snape was right about him turning up at the Gym. After the attack, Harry somehow brought himself here, appearing at Ginny’s feet. I just don’t know how he did it. He doesn’t know how to Apparate and that kind of accidental magic should be impossible! He appeared right in front of Ginny, so maybe it has something to do with their connection, but the power involved had to be enormous to transform the Patronus charm into some kind of a teleportation spell while allowing it to retain its form. For that matter, I don’t know how he got through the wards.”

“Hermione!” Ron chuckled, getting her attention before she went off on a tangent about just how Harry had done what he did. “You were saying?”

Hermione looked embarrassed, but shook it off. “Anyway. The Death Eaters followed him and brought Dementors as backup, triggering Bill’s wards, which alerted Dumbledore, who was apparently looking for me. Bill was able to fight and capture the Death Eaters and hold off the Dementors until Dumbledore arrived. Fawkes healed Harry, who was apparently very hurt...” She swallowed back a lump that threatened to become a sob. Ron reached out and put a hand on her arm. She sucked in a breath and continued. “Kingsley Shacklebolt took the captured Death Eaters to the Ministry, and I heard someone

say Mad-Eye was going to track down how they were able to find and attack Harry.”

Ron grunted and went back to sanding. “So how did we not hear this bloody fracas in the backyard?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes and sounded peeved. “Apparently, your brother cast a spell to hide it all from us. The spell also prevented the Death Eaters from entering the house unless a Weasley let them in. He was trying to keep us all safe.”

Growling, Ron sanded harder. “Of course. Just like Bill. Protect us whether or not we want it, especially if it’ll get him killed at the same time. He and Harry are two of a kind. What happened after I left?”

“I’m not sure I really understand what happened. Dumbledore used Legilimency on Ginny to find out what happened, at least the parts Ginny saw, and then Ginny left to go upstairs. Dumbledore whispered with Bill for a minute, then followed her. For once, you know as much as I do.”

“Ginny all right?” He vividly remembered how Harry looked after his Occlumency sessions with Snape. “She need me up there?”

“No, she’s fine. Dumbledore’s apparently a gentler than Snape. She was just a bit woozy, but said she was going to take a bath. Honestly, I think she was going to try to see Harry.”

The muscles around Ron’s jaw clenched, and he seemed like he was going to say – or ask – a lot more. But he just let out a long, slow breath.

“No surprise there. I think Blast-Ended Skrewts are gentler than Snape. Well, I guess I’ll finish this up, at least the sanding, and see if I can’t sneak in to see Harry.”

He trusted her when she said he knew as much as she did. Even if she was a member of the Order, he trusted her to tell him what she knew. The ties between her, Harry and himself went deeper than any she had to the Order.

But he knew he didn't know everything about what had happened to her. It was what she had said earlier about 'having' to leave her parents. He was fairly sure they weren't in danger; she would have said something about that the night before when she'd been reaming out the Order. No – it was something else. Something had caused her to leave and seek out Victor Krum. It seemed logical, anyway. Something happened with her family and she had to leave...maybe keeping them out of danger? She went to Krum, and the Order recruited her.

He shifted positions to get at an area nearer where she was sitting. "So, you want to tell me about it? Why you had to leave your parents, I mean."

Hermione frowned. "Only if you let me help you."

"With what?"

"All of...this. Whatever project you're doing." She leaned an elbow on the dresser and looked down at him. "What are you doing, Ron Weasley?"

"Refinishing Mum and Dad's dresser. Then the rest of their room. I've got just enough time before Hogwarts starts to finish it, I think." He plucked a splinter from his thumb, then went back to sanding.

"I had no idea you knew how to do any of that." She knelt down next to him.

"I didn't know I did either." He shook his head. "Grandad Charlie taught me a bit of woodworking when I was a kid, before Hogwarts, but I haven't kept up with it since. I was bored out of my gourd, so I decided to be productive for once. Got Mum to teach me to cook, and I refinished the kitchen."

Hermione's eyebrows went up. "Ron...I'm impressed! What can I do to help?"

Ron shrugged again and looked over at her. "Just keep me company? It can get a mite lonely working out here...and I want to hear what upset you so much you had to run away from home."

She stood up and crossed her arms over her chest. "Ronald Weasley, I am as perfectly capable of helping you with this as I am with anything else. I will not have you put me off."

He blinked in surprise. Was it just him, or was Hermione more prickly than normal?

Ron paused his sanding and sat perfectly still for a moment. "Yes. You are. I'd even put down money you're better at it than I am." He was studiously not looking at her. "But I want to do this on my own."

Her expression softened some. "You don't mind me being out here with you?"

Okay...now I know something is wrong. Whatever it is...she's hurt, if she doubts even that.

This time, he did look at her, meeting her eyes. "No. I told you. You are welcome wherever I am, no matter what."

She looked away first, staring down at her hands. "Thank you...it's nice to hear I'm wanted, at least by someone."

Ron was tempted to ask: what about Victor? But he held his tongue. He reached out and put his fingertips under her chin, gently pushing her head up.

"Hermione Granger, you are my best friend. Whether or not you're in the Order of the Phoenix, dating a Quidditch star, or a bushy-haired know-it-all, that is never going to change. That means I want you around. It also means that when something's hurting you, I want to help. I'm not always good at the helping part, but I can try."

Her hand reached for his as he pulled it away from her face. "Promise?"

Ron nodded slowly, letting his hand close around hers. "I promise. I will always be your friend, no matter what. I will always be here for you and I will never turn you away."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'll hold you to that, Ron Weasley."

He smiled and dropped his hand. "Feel free. So, you want to tell me what happened?"

She looked away as if she were ashamed. "It's nothing, really. I just didn't get along with the cousins who came for the family reunion. That's all. I don't want to distract you from your work."

It was Ron's turn to narrow his eyes. I know better than that, Hermione.

He didn't know what to say to convince her. He was afraid anything he said would push her farther away. He put his sander down and stood in front of her. Slowly, he reached out a hand and put it on her shoulder, leaving it there until she looked up at him.

"The dresser can wait. You're more important than it is. I told you – I'm your friend, and I want to help. If you don't want to talk, that's okay. I'm still here. But something's wrong. Even I can see it." He swallowed hard. He knew he was getting dangerously close to saying something that would tear them apart again, but he wasn't going to leave her to deal with this alone, not if there was anything he could do. "Please let me help."

He was surprised when she sniffed and tried to blink back tears. He was even more surprised when she closed the distance between them and leaned against him.

Ron didn't know what else to do but wrap his arms around her and let her cry. She tucked her arms close to her body and let him hold her.

He didn't say anything – he didn't really know what to say. He felt her tears run down his bare chest and felt her shaking in his arms as she

sobbed. Ron felt lost as she cried; he wanted nothing more than to take her pain away, but he didn't know how.

I just don't know what to do. It wasn't an unfamiliar feeling for him. He rarely knew what to do or to say unless he'd had time to think about it before hand, and in all of his many thoughts of how Hermione might end up in his arms, crying like this wasn't one of them. He just stroked her hair and let her cry.

He didn't know how long they stood there like that before she drew away, sniffing. She wouldn't look at him again, and if anything, looked more embarrassed than he felt, but she still stood close enough to him her hair brushed against his shoulders when the breeze caught it.

So he didn't say anything about it. He felt a hot rush of shame as he realized he really hadn't want to let go; about how good she had felt in his arms, and how good it made him feel that she trusted him enough to break down like that.

When she finally looked up, he reached out with one hand and brushed the tears from her face, almost as if he were wiping away the last traces of awkwardness between them. He tried not to think about her leaning into his touch. He tried not to think about how much he enjoyed touching her.

"Better now?" He asked, wishing he could get his voice above a whisper.

She nodded.

Ron smiled. At least she was a little better. Maybe he had done something right after all. He let his hand fall to her shoulder and then run, ever so lightly, down her arm. He felt guilty about that too. The touch was more for him than for her. His hand fell over hers and he felt her fingers lace with his.

"I'm not good at this," he admitted quietly. "I don't always know what to say, and I've not always been the best at listening, but I can try, if you want to talk."

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what to say about it, really."

Again, Ron didn't know what to say. He didn't know if she wanted more reassurances or if she wanted him to stop asking. He stood there, silent, and then decided it didn't matter what he said, sooner or later she was going to be mad at him again. He might as well try to get her to talk; he might as well try to help. At least then, when he did something stupid, he'd at least know he tried.

"Just tell me what happened, then. I'll listen, and I promise to try not to say anything stupid this time."

She gave him a penetrating look, as if trying to figure out what he meant by that. She seemed to weigh things in her mind before she reached down and picked up his sander with her free hand. She held it out to him.

"You work. I'll talk."

Ron realized he was smiling again. He let his hand drop away from hers and pulled the stools over again. He sat down on his and started sanding again.

Hermione sat on the stool next to him, giving him enough room to work, but she sat much closer than he had expected her to. She watched him work for a few minutes before she started talking.

At first, she was so quiet he almost couldn't hear her talking as she explain about the family reunion. Her voice got a little stronger as she talked about her cousins and her mother. She blushed furiously when she talked about the final argument with her mother, and Ron noticed she didn't tell him how the argument had come about.

As she talked, Ron felt anger stirring at her family – her mother especially – but forced it down with the rest of his emotions. There would be time enough to be mad later. Right now, the only thing that mattered was that Hermione needed him.

When she finished, Ron knew he needed to say something, but, as usual, he didn't know what to say. How could he tell her things were all right? It seemed to him her mother had rejected her because she was a witch. What could he say to make that pain any better? He'd never experienced that kind of rejection before, that kind of isolation.

At least he knew his earlier theory made sense. After her argument with her mother, she'd gone to Bulgaria to see Krum. If there was anyone who could get from London to Bulgaria by herself, it would be Hermione. And she was certainly upset enough to have done something like that. The Order had found her there and recruited her.

He could have done a better job taking care of her, though, the bloody git.

He sanded and thought. He thought about Percy and how his mother still wanted him to be part of the family. He thought about how mad his Mum had been at the twins and their dream of starting a joke shop – or how mad she had been when he and Harry had taken the flying car. He thought about how Seamus Finnegan had reacted when Harry had insulted his mother, and how even Draco Malfoy's mother seemed to dote over him.

"Family's weird," Ron finally said. "It doesn't always make sense. It's kind of why we're so mad at Percy. Not so much because he disagreed with us, but because he walked out on us. He's still family. We're mad at him, sure, but if he ever came back and apologized for being a daft git, he's still be family. It might take awhile and the twins would make him pay for it, but he'd be forgiven."

Ron struggled with how to explain what he was thinking. It wasn't something he'd ever given conscious thought to before, let alone put into words. "Your Mum loves you, Hermione. It's something about being a mother, I think. Harry's aunt loves her great whale of a son. Draco Malfoy's mother even loves him. I think, given time, you and your Mum will be all right. It might not be easy and it might not be soon, but she's your Mum. It'll be all right."

Hermione looked surprised. "You really think so?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah, I do. I mean, family is family. And mine can't be the only family that goes spare at each other and then makes it better later. But family is family, and in the end, I think that's all that matters."

Hermione leaned against his shoulder. "Thank you, Ron."

He shrugged. "You're welcome, I think. I told you, I'm always here. I might not always be good at it, but I'm always here."

"I know," Hermione smiled, still leaning against him.

"Good," Ron said, the seeds of another plan forming in his head as he tried to ignore his guilt. Guilt over how it made him feel that she was there, with him. Guilt over he had a family that would never treat him the way her family had treated her.

But that, at least, he could share with her. I'm going to spend the rest of the summer making sure she knows does have a family here...and no matter what, she always has me.

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Nothing is every easy. Or simple.

That was a fact of life that never seemed to change. Albus Dumbledore tried to live simply and tried to keep most things in his life as simple as possible, but it was one of the few areas of his life he consistently failed at. The difference between this situation and most of the others he dealt with was that Albus didn't entirely know what was going on.

It was not a feeling he was used to. Or comfortable with.

Other times, he might have been amused at the novelty of his own ignorance.

Unfortunately, my ignorance could cost Harry his life.

It was not a thought lending itself to amusement or even comfort. But he wasn't sure there was a way to correct his ignorance before he had to make a decision about whether or not to return Harry to the Dursleys.

Contrary to what he had told the Weasleys and the Order, he had not decided if Harry would be going back – that summer or ever again. However, as long as they thought he was going back, he would not give them what might turn out to be false hope.

It was that decision that brought him to stand outside the Burrow, enjoying the afternoon heat, sucking on a sherbet lemon, trying to think his way through things.

The simple truth was, Albus didn't want Harry to go back there. He hadn't wanted Harry to be in the care of his relatives since his first year when he'd seen the letters addressed to The Cupboard Under the Stairs.

Why didn't I ever check on him? Why didn't I allow myself to be there for him? He paused, examining the thoughts carefully, as if searching for their hidden flaw. What was I afraid of?

The last question hung in his mind, and he knew finding its answer would lead him to the truth about why he had allowed Harry Potter to suffer the Dursleys as he had. Because another truth he had been carefully avoiding was that he could have easily kept a better eye on the Dursleys. Did I trust too much in human nature?

It was one of his greatest flaws and greatest strengths; his belief in the power of human nature to nurture and love and be compassionate.

No. No, that is a mere excuse, and I know it. Albus sighed, and knew he still didn't know why he had made the errors he had, despite how much he cared for the boy. And it tore at him, knowing his mistakes had cost Harry so much. Knowing it was probably his mistakes that had led Harry Potter to be lying in a bed while Ginny Weasley – a girl possibly as hurt and broken as Harry - clung to him.

All because of his mistakes.

Though in all truth, Albus wasn't sure what else he could have done to protect Harry from Voldemort. If Harry had been vulnerable before his restoration, even for a moment, Voldemort would have found a way to kill him, no matter how weak the Dark Lord had become.

Tom was hardly the only consideration. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to feel bitter. Angry. Resentful. If only the Ministry knew what their Oath would create, would they have forced it upon me after Grindelwald fell?

He pushed the bitterness away. It was no matter. There was no way the Ministry could have foreseen Voldemort, or Dumbledore's need to care for Harry. The Oath had weighed on him more than ever the past sixteen years, a weight that had grown every day Harry had been with the Dursleys. If not for the Oath, would I have taken him?

When Voldemort had been defeated, Albus had not even let himself even think about the idea; it simply wasn't possible for anyone bound by the Oath to take an orphan child, let alone one who had defeated a Dark Lord while still in nappies.

Nor could I trust the Ministry to do right by a child. Another pang of regret stabbed at him. What if he had accepted the position of Minister? Could he had reformed an already corrupt Ministry? Could he have single-handedly turned aside a corruption that had found its roots over a hundred years in the past?

It is arrogance to think I could have and arrogance to think I should have tried. It had been the right choice to become Headmaster to try to gently turn aside the corruption, to make each succeeding generation less susceptible than the last. Alas, there too, I failed.

He hung his thin shoulders and shook his head. None of it mattered right then. The only thing that mattered in that moment was the fate of Harry Potter.

There was much to consider. Could he truly send the boy back to a place where he was being abused to that extent? Before, the

Dursleys protected him from both Voldemort and the Ministry and kept him out of the hands and away from the influence of those who controlled Fudge. It was the least of two evils. But now?

There was no way for Albus to know.

Politically, it would be easy enough for Albus to use Fudge's own intentions against him, especially if he had been foolish enough to have given the Dursleys written instructions, and force the Minister to allow a guard to stay with Harry. Even possibly take Ron Weasley up on his demand to accompany Harry back to Privet Drive. But what would it accomplish? The attack made it difficult for him to know if the wards were still working. How did Voldemort get past the wards? If they were setting properly, he could not have reached Harry's mind to see him in that gym. Nor should Harry spending most of the day in the gym have been a problem. In fact, he had been heartened to hear Harry was training with Gracie McAllister. He had fond memories of the muggle woman, even if she no longer had memories of him.

As long as he was living and sleeping at 4 Privet Drive, the wards should have strengthened and set themselves. If Cornelius Fudge's meddling had damaged them, I would have felt it by now.

Yet, there was no sense of weakening in the spells he had cast, even though the blood protections on Harry had been very weak, despite his having spent the requisite time there. The wards setting slowly had always been as possibility; it was why he had wanted Harry to spend the entire summer there.

If the wards were setting slowly due to Harry spending large amounts of time away from Privet Drive, then there is only one explanation. But why would he have spent a night away?

He hoped Harry had not run away again. Despite Fudge's warnings, the Order should have been paying close enough attention that if the Dursleys were mistreating Harry to the point he would leave the house, they would have acted.

He had to trust the Order had kept faith while he was gone. He'd had no choice but to go – there was no one else who could have gone where he had gone, done what he had done.

As Albus worked his way through the convoluted possibilities, he realized that he simply didn't know enough of what had happened to Harry this summer to determine why the wards had failed and why Voldemort had attacked. What did you hope to gain by this, Tom? Surely you know by now we would not allow you to kill him? If you were sure enough to send such a force, why didn't you come yourself?

As usual, Voldemort didn't answer Albus' unspoken questions. There was nothing to it; he needed to speak to Severus, Alastor, Kingsley and Nymphadora – and quite possibly Charlie Weasley. He needed to check his instruments at Hogwarts and speak to Harry before he made a decision. He didn't have much time to act.

At least Ronald will be satisfied his friend will be awake if I am forced to take him back to his aunt and uncle, for I must speak to Harry as well.

He looked out and saw Ron and Hermione sitting side-by-side and felt another pang of guilt. He knew he owed Ron Weasley an apology, but now was not the time to give it.

Or, perhaps, is there a part of me that feels I deserve his anger, too?

He smiled to himself. Sometimes, he wondered if he had become so adept at hiding things from others that he had begun to hide things from himself. It was a most disturbing thought, especially in light of all he still had to tell Harry, and the decisions the young man had to make.

Ahh, would that I could make such decisions for him still. But now he has enough knowledge to harm himself and the Order and not enough to act wisely.

Keeping Harry in the dark concerning the Order, Voldemort and the Prophecy was not the greatest – nor the least – of his mistakes, but it was the one that could prove most costly.

He tightened his grip on his staff and almost shook his head. How long had it been since he'd carried aught but a wand? But a staff was needed where he had gone.

If only my going had not cost us so much. He pushed the thought aside. There was no way to know if his absence would have changed things. He had to trust that Severus Snape had done as he asked and looked after Harry to the best of his ability.

This summer has not gone well. Dumbledore regretted having had to let go of events in order to discharge the duties he had sworn to. He refused to think about what would have happened if Hermione Granger had not sent him that note, or if Fawkes had been even ten minutes later delivering it to him.

It had already taken the phoenix two days to reach him, for fire-travel didn't work inside a Grove or a Circle. He had just left the Grove and read the note when he felt the wards on the Burrow fall as someone Translocated through them with more magic than he had felt in a long time.

He had arrived to see Bill Weasley holding back a host of Dementors. He had felt the spell Bill had put around the Burrow and knew that even if Bill, Ginny and Harry had fallen, the Dementors could not have entered the Burrow. William's spell would have kept the Dementors out of the house, but the cost would have been grave.

He could already feel the wards Bill had put in place. The mingled energies of High Magic and Lore crackled around the Burrow. The magic tingled with overtones of heat and sand and sun and fairly sang with the taste of old powers. They were as elegant as anything he could have created – if not quite as powerful.

William has far more knowledge and power than I would have expected, even for a Curse Breaker. He knew the Curse Breakers were more than they seemed. He had long known they crept into the

dark places of the world and banished the ancient powers that resided there – remnants of Dark Arts from deep in the past. He knew their true purpose and calling, and admired them for it.

He often wondered what the wizarding world would think if they knew what the Gringotts Goblins had done for them.

He smiled slightly, remembering Bill as a younger man, a brilliant student at Hogwarts who had come to him seeking instruction he could not give, no matter how much he had wanted to.

He couldn't teach Bill anymore than he could teach Harry. He again sighed at restrictions of his oath, popping another sherbert lemon in his mouth. Poppy will fuss about my teeth when I return to Hogwarts. Which I must do soon, if I am to know if I must return Harry to Privet Drive in time.

Still, there was one small matter that needed attending to. And if Albus were thinking well of any delay that would prevent Harry from having to return to the Dursleys, he hid it from himself quite well.

Albus Dumbledore raised his wand to add his own spells to those protecting the Burrow.

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Tonks crept along the edge of the wards quietly, managing to be unseen in broad daylight as only an Auror could.

She found the man she was looking for at the far edge of the Weasley's property, holding his ever present cup of bitter hot tea, looking off into the distance.

Unfair. The bastard fought off nine Death Eaters and a host of Dementors almost by himself, and he doesn't look like he's done more than go for a morning stroll.

"Heya, Nymph. You gonna tell me why you're mad at me yet?" His voice held a note of amusement and a note of uncertainty. She wasn't sure which one was more annoying.

“Sneaking up on you is a pain in the ass. And it’s ‘Tonks’. Don’t make me carve it into your forehead.” She walked up next to him, running a hand through her short pink hair. “You’re damn right I’m mad at you. What kind of fool stunt was that, putting us all to sleep so you could play the bloody hero?”

He turned to look at her, and for the first time she saw the fear in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Tonks. I really am...but they’re my family. They’re all I have left right now. I couldn’t let them come running headlong to the rescue only to get hurt or killed.”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. He gave up his job to come fight the war, and his brother stole his girl. All his close friends are in Egypt, and here I am yelling at him for protecting his family.

“I understand, sorta.” She put her hands in her pockets to keep herself from reaching out for him. “But I’m here to help protect you guys.”

Do you even need me here? Do you even want me here? She’d failed Harry. Was she going to fail the Weasleys, too?

He nodded. “I know. If it had been just you, then I would have been asking for help, not locking it away.” Bill swallowed the last of his tea, and she could tell he was still trying his best to look cool and unflappable. “Even if I went down, you were still in there with them. I knew you’d take care of my family.”

Tonks had known more than a few smooth charmers, and coming from a lot of them, she’d take his last comment as a platitude to soothe her wounded ego. From Bill it came across as sincere.

“Charlie and Fleur are back.” Tonks wanted to be the one to tell him. Everyone else would beat around the bush or try to cushion the blow, which would only make it worse for him.

"I figured they'd be coming." He waved his wand, shrinking his empty mug so he could stick it in his pocket.

"It's why you're out here instead of back there."

"Cute, clumsy, and insightful. Very attractive combo." Bill had turned back to looking off in the distance.

"Flattery and flirting will get you a lot of very naughty places. A different subject is not one of them," Tonks scolded. "Hiding out here isn't going to make things easier."

"Yes, it will," Bill said. "I'll stay out here until they leave. No awkward moments where I have to interact with them, no ill-timed comments or tense situations where people think they have to choose sides."

"Wow. You really liked her, didn't you?" Tonks said, shaking her head reproachfully. "You're doing that whole noble thing where you don't stand in the way of the Wonder Couple's chance of True Love and Happiness, aren't you?"

"That's the plan." Bill smiled wryly.

Tonks groaned. "Ugh. You Weasleys. With all your noble self-sacrifice, it's a wonder any of you manage to procreate at all."

Bill grinned. "That's why those of us who do procreate make sure to have extras. Besides, Charlie and Fleur are gonna have beautiful children."

She rolled her eyes. "You really want them to be happy. I can't decide if that's incredibly sad or incredibly sweet."

"Go with whichever one makes you more likely to let me stand out here and be noble."

"Hardly." She tugged at his arm. "You realize the only way you're gonna keep me from making snide comments and being a right nasty bitch to Fleur for breaking my friend's heart is if you're there to stop me?"

Bill sighed. "I do now. That's blackmail."

"Yes. And I'm a woman. It happens. Now come on, prove you're a Gryffindor and go be all noble in the same room with them."

"Fine, fine." Bill held up his hands in defeat. "But I'm not promising I won't come back out here to be noble from afar."

She grabbed his hand and led him back towards the Burrow. "If you think it would help, I'll sit in your lap and snog you to see if she gets jealous."

"I don't think that would help."

Tonks pouted a bit. "But it'd be fun."

Bill laughed. "Can't argue with that."

End Chapter

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Aftershocks

Trembling hands fumbled with lock and key.

After seconds that felt like hours, Gracie stumbled into her tiny flat, her head spinning.

She had heard him scream.

She couldn't get the sound of it out of her head.

It had been a raw, primal sound, echoing through the gym that had become her sanctuary, her only place to hide from other memories. She staggered into her kitchen, splashing cold water on her face.

She turned the water hot and scrubbed the blood off her hands.

Come on, Gracie-girl. Pull yourself together and think. You've been jumped before. It should be old hat by now.

She stripped off her jacket and stared at the blood on her shirt.

They had been waiting for her, out by the back entrance.

Six of them, in dark robes and white masks, standing between her and the back door to the gym. They'd even waited while she parked her bike and climbed off. It almost felt as if they were giving her a strange sort of contemptuous courtesy.

Either that, or they were supremely arrogant.

She'd felt the first hints of fear; not for herself, but for Harry. She didn't want him caught up in her past. He shouldn't have to deal with her demons as well as his own.

She knew she still had enemies, and there was a part of her that wasn't surprised they'd tracked her to Little Whinging. The people who wanted her dead could reach her anywhere she hid. How had

she ever thought to escape? How had she ever thought a few years of peace meant she was free of her past?

Strange she didn't recognize this group. New mob assassins with a penchant for the dramatic? Dark robes and white masks definitely had a certain theatric flair she almost admired.

She didn't recognize them, but they felt familiar. It was a nagging familiarity, one that had been playing at the back of her mind ever since she'd met Harry Potter.

"Top o' the morning to you, gents. Collecting for charity, or did Duncan forget to pay the rent?"

Gracie pressed her palms against her countertop. She'd been so confident, so bloody arrogant. There were just six of them. Only six. She was fully capable of taking on those six and more. What did she have to worry about, other than explaining six bodies to the kid?

She didn't relish coming clean with him, but maybe if she had, he would have trusted her enough to tell her what he was so afraid of.

Everything had changed when each of the six had drawn those slender wood rods, just like the one the kid carried. The rush of fear was like being plunged headfirst into ice water. The sight of those pieces of wood told her what she hadn't wanted to know.

They had not come for her.

They had come for him.

One of them spoke, raising his arm with a flourish of black robes, brandishing his stick at her: "We're here for the boy. Be a good muggle and stay where you are, and we might let you live."

Muggle? What the hell is a muggle? Even the word sounded ugly, but she'd never heard it before.

She didn't have a chance to answer before she'd heard his scream. The sound of it had cut her like a razor, leaving parts of her bloody. Parts of her she hadn't ever thought about before.

Leaning over her sink, she closed her eyes. There were only six of them. I should never have hesitated. I never used to hesitate.

She remembered her stomach tightening with dive-bombing butterflies as she struck out at them. She had attacked to disable. Not to kill. I should have just killed them.

The memories made her sick to her stomach.

She stepped forward, trying to push past them, trip them or throw them to the ground, but the six of them were good, and used to fighting together. They deftly avoided her, easily surrounding her.

The de facto leader had laughed. "This is going to be fun."

His arm had jerked and he thrust the stick out at her, screaming: "Avada Kedavra!"

From the tip of his stick, a streak of green light had lanced out toward her.

She turned sideways and it flew past her to splash against the wall of the closest building, blowing a chunk out of the wall.

Her hands tensed, curling into claws. Short fingernails scraped along the countertop. Bruised knuckles cracked.

What the fuck was that? Adabra cadabra? Something kept tugging at the back of her mind. Something she thought she should know. It was like a drunken memory or a half-remembered piece of a dream. Her mind rebelled against itself as it sought answers she didn't think she still had.

The scream hadn't stopped.

It was a hollow sound that now echoed in her mind, a constant pressure on her to do something, anything to get to him. But she had paused for a breath; no longer than a heartbeat. She'd hesitated to decide if she was going to do what she needed to do to get past them.

She pushed herself away from the sink, stripping off her bloodstained clothes.

I never used to hesitate. I used to be able to kill without thinking about it.

But wasn't that why she retired? Because it was too easy to kill? Too easy to strike first and worry about being wrong later?

Stupid. I am so bloody fucking stupid. If I'd just done what needed doing, I might have saved him.

She staggered into her bedroom, and pulled on clean clothes. She needed to get rid of the blood. It was like having his blood all over her.

The screaming had quieted. For the infinite pause between breaths, between heartbeats, it was silent.

Then he screamed again.

The leader swung his stick around to point at her again.

Gracie had stepped inside the arc of the leader's motion and one hand – fingers stiffened into a spear – stabbed into his throat. Taut flesh gave way, and he had choked and staggered, leaning forward; her foot whipped out in an arc, her heel smashing into the side of his knee. With a sickening crack, he had crumpled.

As he had fallen, she grabbed his hair, pulling him into her rising knee and driving his nose up into his brain.

She'd thrown the body aside, her leg extending as her body turned. The angle was perfect; her heel of her police boot caught the second assailant right behind his jaw, where the bone connected to the face.

With the wet sound of bone splintering his jaw had torn loose from its hinge, tearing skin and muscle even as his neck had broken.

Two of them were screaming words she didn't understand at her, barely audible over the sound of Harry's screaming. Flashes of multicolored light had streaked by, flaying her peripheral vision, fireworks and tracers bleeding away her visual acuity.

As the second man had fallen, she'd taken his stick from his hand. Momentum had carried her forward and she drove the wood through a third man's eye, deep into his brain. Blood and viscera from the eye splattered on her face, her shirt, her hands.

The screaming had stopped again.

She staggered from her bedroom to her small liquor cabinet. She just didn't want to remember anymore.

The other three had spread out, trying to keep her too occupied to strike effectively. She'd kicked one in the throat, crushing him between her foot and the brick wall behind her. The fifth of them had stepped out of her way and was spinning, bringing his stick around to point at her as she slid up behind him, bodies pressed together as intimately as lovers, her arms wrapped around him as she broke his neck.

The sixth one had waved his stick in the air and vanished with the sound of thunder.

Gracie had hesitated, and one of them had gotten away. She searched her cabinet for a tumbler, setting the heavy glass on the counter.

She tried to get into the gym. She could hear commotion, chaos behind the door, but even after her key had opened the lock, the door wouldn't open. She battered it with feet and fists until the wooden doorframe had given way.

She stepped past the doorway, into the back storeroom, and had been frozen, as if some unseen force was pushing her back. She'd

fought every step of the way as if running through quicksand. It seemed a timeless struggle. She couldn't go backwards; she could barely move forward. She stepped into the void, driving her mind with will alone, focusing her thoughts into a single sharp point, pushing past the invisible barrier.

Step by step.

It took an eternity to get free.

She finally staggered into the gym to find nothing. No one at all. The air had been still, with the faint hint of a quickly fading chill and the air had smelled burnt, heavy with the sweet scent of scorched flesh and the acrid tang of burnt hair.

She pulled out the only hard liquor she had in her house – an unopened bottle of very good whisky.

It doesn't make sense. There has to be an explanation...but there isn't. First the kid glows in the dark, now this.

What had those bolts of red and green light flashing around her been? How had the black-robes been able to summon them with shouted words, somehow shooting from the ends of their wood rods?

Part of her wanted to chalk it up to special effects – pyrotechnics and flash powder. But she'd seen the kid glow.

Why would the kid carry one of those things, anyway? He'd never shown any sign of having that kind of pyrotechnical skill – or the money to pay for the equipment. And her robed assailants had certainly acted like they thought those blasts of light would do something to her.

There had to be an explanation.

One of those lights blew a chunk out of the wall. And the kid glowed in the dark.

The gym had been empty.

She had found blood on the floor – still warm to the touch. Blood on the mats, and splinters of broken wood littering the floor.

And why in the fuck do I think I know more than I do? Why do I feel like there's something here I'm missing, something that should be so fucking obvious, but isn't?

She didn't know if the kid was alive or dead, and she needed to drown the sound of his scream long enough to think clearly. She poured a generous portion of whisky, but as she put the glass to her lips, she saw her couch. Neatly folded sheets lay on top of fluffed pillows – but there was no sign of any of the kid's things.

"Damn it!" Gracie screamed, hurling both bottle and glass against the wall. They hit, and shattered.

They'd come into her home and taken away any sign Harry had ever been there.

Whoever 'they' were.

The anger washed away the confusion, the despair, the guilt. It galvanized her long enough that she was able to brush it away, leaving her with the iron will and expressionless face that had served her for years with the Yard.

She was a teacher who had failed to protect her student. A cop who had become as bad as the criminals she hunted.

He was a skinny child with more secrets than she could understand. A kid with enemies scarier and more dangerous than any she'd ever had.

As far as Gracie knew, he really didn't have anyone.

Would anyone from wherever he does go to school even care if he went missing? Will anybody but me care that Harry Potter has vanished or was killed?

It didn't matter. She cared.

He had her.

She was going to find him. And if he was dead, she was going to find the people who had killed him.

She wouldn't hesitate a second time.

- 0 -

It was a strange late afternoon in Little Whinging, though most people living there didn't know it, mostly because they didn't notice the commotion around McAllister's Gym. That in itself was strange, because most people in Little Whinging would notice a group of oddly dressed people congregating at a well-known downtown building.

A few even waved to the man standing out front. He wasn't tall or short, and his features were so ordinary that he tended to fade from memory as soon as someone saw him. His eyes and hair were a nondescript brown, and he was almost always smiling. There was just something so normal about him, people tended not to notice he was wearing a dark gray cloak.

Mum always said I should have been an Obliviator. Drake Stevens waved at another couple walking to an early dinner and kept his watch while the rest of Squad Four did their work. He had been a Hit Wizard since graduating Hogwarts a decade before, and was happy with his job, despite it not being what he had wanted to be when he grew up. Then again, not everyone was sure Drake had ever grown up. Though, Drake suspected, if he hadn't already, he would be growing up very soon.

Squad Four wasn't the most famous of the Ministry Hit Squads, or even the best. They certainly weren't the Silver Griffons, which was composed of mostly Aurors. But Squad Four had faced more than their share of Dark Wizards and had the distinction of having done so at home as well as abroad. They were known for their subtlety and their light touch. It was just that light touch that was called for at the

site of the first Death Eater attack since You-Know-Who had made his return just a few weeks before.

No one was really surprised the Boy Who Lived had been the subject of the attack. Nor was anyone really surprised the attack had failed. But the clean-up was hell. Drake still cringed when he thought about the five mangled bodies they'd found behind the gym and the condition of the Death Eaters inside the gym, most of whom had been beaten into unconsciousness.

To say nothing of what looked to be tampering with the scene before the Ministry had arrived. Drake had no idea why the Ministry had waited almost four hours to send anyone to the scene, but they had. They'd gotten the alert at the Ministry as a massive surge of magical energy had broken through wards around a location in Little Whinging, but had gotten word from Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt that he was on scene.

It wasn't much of a surprise; Shacklebolt was one of the best the Ministry had to offer. Near-instantaneous response from him was expected. But for someone of Shacklebolt's skill and reputation taking four hours to call for a squad?

That didn't make sense. Yet, for some reason, the Ministry had taken it in stride and sent Squad Four in to investigate. They'd found battered and dead Death Eaters, a neat and tidy crime scene with all the truly important evidence already gone, and Kingsley Shacklebolt nowhere in sight. They'd secured the scene, incarcerated the Death Eaters – who refused to talk – and waited for further orders.

Even worse, they had found Harry Potter missing. He had apparently cast a Patronus Charm and then disappeared in flash of silver light, at least according to what their Squad Leader had been able to learn from his limited Legilimency. Right through the wards the Death Eaters had erected around the gym. Wards Squad Four hadn't yet managed to take down.

Their Squad Leader had also learned six Death Eaters had been dispatched to delay the muggle owner of the gym from arriving on time, and another six had been sent to kill the muggle woman who

was apparently teaching Harry Potter, though they couldn't figure what she'd been teaching him.

All the remaining evidence pointed to her having killed five of the Death Eaters and escaped.

They'd informed the Minister, who had informed his Undersecretary. His Undersecretary had acted with admirable haste and efficiency and sent word to Squad Four that backup was on the way. All the backup they needed and never would have wanted. No one ever asked for him.

Percy Weasley hadn't given them a choice. He was coming. Which left Drake standing outside, waiting for him.

He didn't have to wait long before he appeared. Like Dumbledore, his Apparition was nearly silent. Like Potter, he seemed to ignore the wards. He stood tall, despite age and injury. His dark blue Auror's cloak had obviously seen better days but his wand, held tightly in one gnarled fist, looked as good as new. Both of his eyes – one mundane, one magic - fixed on Drake Stevens. To his credit, the young man didn't flinch – much.

"Where is she? The muggle woman." His voice was harsh and impatient.

Drake just smiled as politely as he could. If nothing else, he would follow procedure, even if procedure had been all but ignored so far. "Your orders, sir, and the password."

Was it his imagination, or was there an approving glint in the old man's eye?

"Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus," he said, handing Drake the sheet of parchment with his hastily written orders. "Master Auror Alastor Moody, recalled to service by Ministry Undersecretary Percival Weasley. Now, I want to talk to Gracie McAllister."

Drake read over the orders and cast a quick charm to verify them. "I'm afraid that's impossible, sir. You see, she got away."

“What do you mean, she got away?” Moody growled, taking a step closer to Drake.

The Hit Wizard stood his ground. “We didn’t catch her, sir. She was gone before we got here.”

Moody’s magical eye rolled around in its socket, but his remaining real eye was focused on the man in front of him. At least the answer had the virtue of being honest. He huffed. “So who in the bloody hell are you, and what moron gave you the dead messenger detail?”

“Drake Stevens, Hit Wizard. Undersecretary Weasley assigned me as your liaison.” The Hit Wizard managed to stay somewhat cheerful.

“Hmph,” Moody grunted, and took a swallow from his hip flask. “We’ll see about that, boy. I’d better not see you eat or drink a bloody thing for the next two hours. Liaise me to whatever useless tosser is running this puppet show so I can tell him what he’s doing wrong and get on with locating this Muggle motorcycle woman you lot managed to let escape.”

Drake decided not to ask how Moody knew so much about the muggle woman who had killed five Death Eaters, and led Moody to a statuesque blond man with a chiseled, heroic face. Immaculately dressed in blue Auror’s robes, he was smugly watching the Obliviator squad work their magic on the gym.

Moody looked him up and down and snorted. “You’re an Auror?”

Turning, the man offered Moody a dazzling smile, holding out his hand. “Reginald Lockhart, Auror and Special Investigator in command of Squad Four, assigned directly to Minister Fudge. You might have heard of my cousin, Gilderoy. Quite the adventurer, until that dreadful Chamber debacle at Hogwarts. But be assured, he taught me everything he knows, which is why Minister Fudge assigned me to find out how Death Eaters managed to slip in past our surveillance of The Boy Who Lived.”

Moody ignored Reginald's hand. "Apparition or Portkey." The aging Auror snapped as he stalked across the gym, stopping at a spot near the door.

"Well, yes, obviously, Auror Moody, but I shall discover how they discovered his whereabouts."

The old Auror was ignoring him and looking around at the scene. Shards of broken glass littered the floor and there were bloodstains everywhere. Unconscious Death Eaters were bound, lined up against the back wall of the gym.

"Sloppy." Moody growled. "Harry Potter is missing and you managed to lose a Muggle woman who killed five Death Eaters. Damn sloppy."

"Yes, well," Reginald started to spin his excuses, but Alastor Moody had heard them all before. At least twice.

"Either you know where Potter is or you don't give a bloody shit about where the Death Eaters took him, because you're too damn busy trying to figure out how to shove more of your head up your ass."

Reginald sighed dramatically. "Aren't you retired?"

Moody smiled. It was an expression reminiscent of a rabid dog. "I'll retire when I'm dead. Maybe. Undersecretary Weasley seemed to think you needed some help, so he re-activated my commission." His expression twisted into a sour grimace. "I never thought I'd say Percy Weasley was right about anything."

He walked back towards the back gym, his wooden leg clunking on the linoleum.

"Just where do you think you're going, Auror Moody? This is my investigation, and I am instructing you to remain here!" Reginald followed after Moody, trying and failing to look dignified as he scrambled after the old man.

"To find Potter and the McAllister woman." Moody waved at Stevens. "You coming?"

The Hit Wizard fell into step behind Moody, his eyes wide. Moody was well known for working alone; he was a living legend. He had dueled more Death Eaters than anyone except Dumbledore – and rumor had it that Alastor had lost his leg dueling Voldemort himself.

Drake was a Hit Wizard, a magical brawler for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He was good at what he did, and could have been an Auror if not for his poor scores in Potions, but his job at the gym was purely and simply as a guard – Undersecretary Weasley had assigned him to Moody solely based on the virtue of him being there, not for any other reason. Who was he to tag along with Mad-Eye on an investigation?

Reginald waved his wand and the door to the back gym slammed shut. “Auror Moody, I will not have this insubordination.”

Moody grunted, tugging the door open. “Count your blessings, Lockhart. You couldn’t find your ass with both hands and a map. You haven’t even bothered to verify my orders or my commission.” He spun around to face Lockhart. “Constant vigilance!”

Lockhart stumbled backwards, spluttering.

Moody looked at Stevens, reaching for his hip flask. “Let’s go.”

Stevens shrugged. Why not? When was he going to get another chance like this? In for a knut, in for galleon. “Nothing for you to eat or drink for at least two hours. Sir.”

Moody grinned, and clipped the flask back on his belt. “We’re gonna get along just fine, Stevens.”

- 0 -

Remus Lupin had been an active participant in more than a few awkward silences over the years, but none as profound or awkward as the silence that existed between him and Dudley Dursley.

They were walking along an empty street, trying to figure out what to do with one another. They were quite a pair, if anyone had been looking. A tall, massively built boy in expensive clothes walking next to a slender man dressed in a ragged and stained cloth jacket.

Remus had been assigned to take to get the boy home before the Ministry arrived to investigate the battle. If they were careful, and Alastor did his job, officially speaking, Dudley would never have been there.

He wasn't happy about the assignment, but he understood it. Kingsley and Moody had plausible excuses to be there, if they didn't get away before the Ministry arrived. Remus, especially being a werewolf, didn't, and he was capable of blending in with muggles easier than others.

So far, their plan was working well. They'd managed to use illusion to hide most of the evidence of the battle from the muggle woman Dudley had identified as Gracie McAllister, even if she had slipped away before they could Obliviate her, and the three Order members had vanished before the Ministry had arrived.

Given their response time, we could have had the scene completely clean and the captured Death Eaters spirited away before they arrived. Remus thought darkly. Kingsley had done a good job delaying the Ministry, giving the Order time to hide their involvement and to find out what they needed from the Death Eaters. They'd all been glad to find out Duncan McAllister hadn't been killed; he'd just been Imperio'd and told to stay at home. The Order could modify his memory and relocate him easily enough. Gracie McAllister was another matter, but she wasn't Remus' problem.

Dudley was.

The only loose ends were Gracie McAllister and Dudley Dursley. No one was quite sure how to handle McAllister, but

He didn't want to be escorting Dudley home. He wanted to be with Harry. He'd failed James' son enough in his life, leaving the boy alone for the first thirteen years of his life out of a sense of misplaced

nobility. He knew Harry was safe – and alive – at the Burrow. Tonks had gotten word to Kingsley quickly, but it still didn't make Remus itch to be at the Burrow any less.

But he had given his word to the Order to do what was necessary, and someone had to get Dudley home. It wasn't fair to the boy – who had acquitted himself well defending Harry – to leave him without a chance to ask questions.

The irony of answering Dudley's questions when the Order would so rarely answer Harry's was not lost on Remus.

The two of them were taking their sweet time getting Dudley home. Neither one of them were eager to face Vernon or Petunia, so they had ended up wandering silently, walking the distance instead of taking a bus or cab.

"It doesn't seem right," Dudley finally muttered. "Someone gets attacked, you call the police. Someone gets hurt, you take them to the hospital. They don't get dragged off to nowhere by a silver deer. You don't just walk away."

Remus was having a hard time seeing the young man next to him as the fat bully who had tortured Lily and James' son for so many years. He had the haggard expression of someone who had been pushed to his limits and beyond, and his flesh had the unhealthy look of a person who had lost a lot of weight very quickly. But beneath the remaining layers of fat, there were slabs of solid muscle overlaying his heavy bones. Even hunched over with his hands shoved into his pockets, he walked with a motion that would someday become the precise, controlled step of a trained fighter.

"You didn't walk away," Remus answered. "You stayed and fought."

Dudley barked a sharp chuckle. "I guess I did, didn't I?" He shrugged, shifting his weight uncomfortably as he walked. "Will Pot – Harry - be all right?" It was an effort of will for Dudley to choke out his cousin's first name, but he did.

Remus closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. "I don't know. I want him to be."

"Yeah, so do I." Dudley kicked a rock, sending it skittering ahead of them. He suddenly jerked upright, looking around fearfully in case someone had overheard him.

"Don't worry." Remus patted his shoulder. "I won't tell if you don't."

"Thanks."

They walked in silence for a few more steps.

"They really hurt him."

"Yes, they did," Remus answered softly. He was glad he hadn't seen Harry before he'd escaped. He'd arrived at the battle late, and by the time the Order had fought off the seemingly endless number of Death Eaters hiding in and around the gym, Harry had been gone.

There had been over twenty of them at the gym alone; nine more at the Burrow.

Either Voldemort's stronger than we think, or he risked everything on this one chance to capture Harry.

"You lot probably hate me, don't you?"

Remus almost missed a step. There was a depth of pain and longing in Dudley's voice he never expected to hear. I wonder how many real friends Harry's cousin has?

"I don't. You saved his life, Dudley."

The boy nodded. "That's probably something huge, something so big I just can't really get it, because I just don't know enough. I don't know anything about him, not really."

Lupin was surprise Dudley had come to that conclusion, but Dudley also knew a lot of powerful witches and wizards were working to

protect Harry, and he'd seen the number of people sent after his cousin.

"If you can understand that, then you know more than you think." Remus put his hands in his pockets.

The big teenager shuddered. "Back there. That's been his life, hasn't it? In your world and mine. Everyone just hurting him until he breaks."

"Sometimes." Lupin wasn't sure where Dudley was going with the conversation – but it was obvious the boy needed to talk. He saved Harry's life. It's the least I can give him.

"I did. I used to. Hurt him, I mean."

"Why?" Remus was genuinely curious.

"Because it made Dad proud of me. Because he was smarter than me. Because he was special and I'm not."

"It takes a very special kind of man to stand and fight like you did today, Dudley Dursley."

Dudley had fought on even after Harry was gone, his raw physical power on top of the Order's magical expertise had made quicker work of the Death Eaters than Remus would have expected. If he always fights like that, and can become something other than a bully, he's someone I wouldn't mind having at my side.

"Maybe." Dudley shook his head. "But it's not enough."

"What isn't enough?" Remus looked up at the sun, feeling it beating down on him. Tonight was a crescent moon; he could feel it, hiding behind the blue skies. It never seems enough to erase the taint of what we are, does it?

"Remus, right?" Dudley asked hesitantly.

Lupin nodded.

“Last summer. Those...dementoid things attacked me. I saw what I fear the most, and I haven’t been able to stop seeing it since.”

“What did you see?” Lupin was walking a tightrope. He wanted to help Dudley, but he wasn’t sure if he could, not without compromising the Order.

“Me. I saw me like other people saw me. Then I found out what I saw was real. At school all last year everyone was afraid of me and hated me. It never used to bother me, but last year it did. What I did back there, it’s not enough to not make me who I am.”

“A wise man once told me that it is our choices which make us who we are,” Remus answered. “I think he’s right. You can choose to not change or to ignore who you were becoming. Or you can choose to keep fighting the right fights and trying to make yourself something different.”

Dudley nodded, and they lapsed back into silence for a time.

“You lot can fix him, right? I mean, you can fix anything.”

Remus shook his head. “No, we can’t fix anything. Most of the time, we don’t do much fixing at all. But I think he’ll pull through.”

“Good.” Dudley nodded again. “I’d like to see it sometime. Harry’s world, I mean.”

Remus smiled. “I’m sure Harry would love to give you a tour of Hogwarts over the holidays.”

Dudley smiled back. “Yeah, well, I just might come to visit.”

Lupin settled himself and let Dudley lead the way back to Privet Drive. It was start – a small start, but it was a start.

End Chapter

PART II

NOTHING ELSE MATTERS

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Among the Standing Stones

Britannia was a land of myth and magic; legend and mystery wrapped in the mists of coastal fog. There are some myths and legends even wizard-kind believed were tales; whispers of powers any properly educated modern witch or wizard knew to be muggle faerie tales.

Yet, Draco Malfoy found himself trudging through a forest some would say didn't exist, on a trail leading straight to such a myth. The trail they followed curved around and up a steep hill, and seemed to go on forever. Fog played around his tired legs and primeval trees rose far above him, creating a canopy of verdant leaves, leaving the small group in shadowed semi-darkness, occasionally passing through patches of dappled sunlight.

He was exhausted. His lungs and muscles burned, and his clothes were soaked with condensation and sweat, but despite his exertion, he was still as cold and clammy as the heavy air lying strangely still around them. Sore and tired he was, Draco didn't falter, didn't allow himself to show even the slightest hint of weakness.

Just ahead of him, barely out of arm's reach, moved a tall, lithe figure, wrapped in flowing robes so dark they seemed to simply be cut from the fabric of the world around them. Under the hem, Draco could see basilisk skin boots, each step leaving no trail, not even a single leaf or stick disturbed. The Dark Lord wasn't so much as winded by the hours-long climb. But Draco would not flag; he would not relinquish the place he had earned.

The fog grew thicker the deeper into the forest they went. The overpowering scents of decomposing plants and the tang of blood mingled, turning the fog into a perverse parody of incense, threatening to drown Draco with each labored breath he took. But he – Draco Malfoy, useless child of the disgraced Lucius Malfoy – had

managed to keep pace with the Dark Lord when fear and exhaustion had driven 'real' Death Eaters meters back, gasping for air and stumbling every few steps. He was trembling from both fear and excitement, knowing the Dark Lord rewarded perseverance.

They came to the top of the trail, and the fog simply stopped at the edge, surrounding the clearing in an eerie barrier of billowing translucent gray.

The clearing was an eldritch realm, hovering on the brink of our world and the next, an unstable link between two places that were never meant to co-exist. Draco shivered from both the damp cold, and the sudden feeling that if he took another step, he would be standing where no wizard was meant to stand.

What is this place?

Without hesitation, the Dark Lord strode through the invisible barrier and into the clearing.

Without hesitation, Draco followed.

Or, at least, he tried to.

His feet didn't want to seem to move, as if they were trapped by the fog.

The Dark Lord stopped and looked back at Draco with an expression that could have been amused or impatient. Or both.

His eyes, glowing blood red, surveyed the Death Eaters who had chosen to follow him, for not even the Dark Lord had dared command or coerce anyone to follow him to this place. Nor would he punish those who could not – or would not – follow him all the way.

But he waited to see who would dare take the final steps.

The Death Eaters had caught up with Draco, but were also stopped by the invisible barrier.

The Dark Lord's eyes flared a brighter red under his hood, but he did not speak. He glanced between the Death Eaters and Draco, disappointment now evident on his inhuman face.

One of the Death Eaters whipped out his wand and pointed it authoritatively at the fog. "Finite Incantatem"

The fog billowed upward, creating a taller, thicker wall, obscuring the Dark Lord from view. The wand exploded in the Death Eater's hand, splinters of wood driven through his palm. Blood dripped to the ground, and with each drop of red on the dry ground, the fog fell back, almost to its original place.

Draco saw the fog react to the blood, and drew his wand. He rolled up the sleeve of his dark silver-grey robes, and placed the wand tip against the thin flesh of his wrist, right over the largest vein. "Cruento exsanguis."

Blood welled up through his pores, flowing over his wrist, down his arm, staining his robes. He drew his wand away, not bothering to wipe the blood from it.

He ignored the pain, knowing that even if he was wrong, the Dark Lord might at least be less disappointed that he was willing to accept pain and danger to himself to stand with his Lord.

This is magic like any other. This place was meant to be here, built by magic to be here. The trail was the way and this is the door.

Clenching and unclenching his fist to bring more blood to the surface, Draco dripped drop after drop onto the ground where the fog ended, careful to create an unbroken line of blood from one side of the trail to the other.

The fog parted and Draco stepped through, standing behind and to the right of the Dark Lord. It was not a place that had been given to him, but was one he would take. He had found a way to cross the threshold and the others were still fighting the barrier, even though they had seen what he'd done.

The Dark Lord might still punish him for his impudence, but he also might be rewarded for his initiative.

Is this what it's like for Potter? To see 'adult' wizards trying and failing to do what he does so easily?

He canceled the spell on his arm with a touch of his wand and pulled out a small crystal vial from a pouch at his side, quickly draining the contents of the blood-replenishing potion.

One did not go on a trek with the Dark Lord unprepared.

The Dark Lord turned and looked at Draco from under his hood and nodded. The message there was clear; he could stand at the Dark Lord's right hand. For now.

Draco lowered his wand to his side, stunned at what he saw. The barrier was protection against more than intruders. It had hid the nature of the place.

The Standing Stones stood around them, two concentric rings of stone archways; each two tall pillars of rough gray rock standing on their ends with a third across the tops. Thirteen arches drew the outer ring; seven smaller arches drew the inner ring. The ground was a perfect circle of blood stained bedrock, swept clean of dirt and dust. Arcane symbols and runes were etched into the stone and the entire circle pulsed and thrummed with magic drawn from the earth itself. It was primal, elemental and Draco knew his first impression had been correct; this was not a place wizards were meant to stand.

What is it the Dark Lord saw in Potter's mind that brought us here?

Draco knew the Dark Lord shared a connection with Potter; everyone who went to Hogwarts knew. Draco knew the Dark Lord had peered into Potter's mind the night before. When he had come out of his meditation chamber, there had been a flurry of preparation.

Newly-minted Death Eaters had been sent to find Harry Potter, torture him, and bring him before the Dark Lord. If all went according

to plan, the Dark Lord would return to his current headquarters and find a broken Harry Potter waiting for him.

Somehow, Draco didn't think they would succeed.

Draco looked to the Dark Lord and knew he would not be pleased.

But that was the future. Draco pulled his mind back to the present, clearing his mind and focusing himself on the here and now. He would stand with the Dark Lord.

He was one of the few who had dared to follow the Dark Lord to the Standing Stones. The Dark Lord had called for volunteers to come with him after those sent after Potter had departed. Few had been willing.

Purebloods were raised to fear the ancient magics.

Draco could hear, faintly, one or two of the Death Eaters trying to break through the fog, but it seemed none of them wished to spill their blood.

A sound like a gong rang out and the fog rose higher, sealing the circle.

Draco looked up and saw there was a man standing before them where there had been empty air only moment before. He was tall and broad shouldered; his face was weather-beaten, and his dark brown hair was streaked with gray. His mottled gray-green robes brushed the ground. In one hand, he clasped a bronzed wood staff wrapped with living vines.

His eyes shifted between the stormy gray of a cloudy sky, the muddy brown of dirty water, and the rich green of grass. Wind swept across the clearing as he appeared, bringing the scents of rich loam and flowering plants.

He was motionless, as if rooted into the rock under his bare feet or grown from the earth itself.

“Take your pet and leave this place, Abomination. You are not welcome here.”

His voice rumbled, echoing from the depths of the ground beneath them, carried by the winds above them, reverberating from the stones around them.

This was his place, and here his word and his power were absolute.

The Dark Lord bowed mockingly. “I can see that you are much like your mother, Cedric McGonagall. Far too caught up in the moment to remember the simple niceties.” The Dark Lord’s voice was the soft sound of dry skin sliding over silk; whispered, but heard across the clearing as if the intervening space meant nothing.

Draco started in surprise. This Loremaster was related to Professor McGonagall?

The Dark Lord smiled amiably and bowed slightly.

“Cedric McGonagall, may I introduce Draco Malfoy, one of my brighter followers and one of your mother’s students.”

The corners of Cedric’s mouth tightened. “Once more, Abomination, I tell you to leave this place. You and yours are not welcome here.”

The Death Eaters pressing against the barrier where hurled backwards, and Draco could hear cries of pain and the sick thuds as they crashed into trees and fell to the ground.

Voldemort slowly shook his spidery finger at Cedric. “Tsk, ts, Master Druid, you haven’t yet heard what I came to tell you.”

Cedric lifted his staff. “The Dark Lord himself, reduced to the role of door-to-door salesman?” He chuckled softly as he swung his arm so his staff was in front of him. “I have no interest in your words, snake.”

He spun the staff and drove its end into the stone; blue fire erupted along its length. It wrapped itself around his hand, but did not burn him.

With solemn ceremonial dignity, twenty brown-robed figures stepped into their places beneath and beside the outer arches. They stepped from nothingness; birthed by fog, beckoned by flame.

Voldemort laughed. "Fool." The Dark Lord raised his wand, throwing open his robes so they could billow behind him on a breeze that didn't exist. His scaly white hand was bare, but his arm was covered in the faint glittering black of basilisk skin. "But if we must resort to this foolishness, let us do the thing right."

Draco gripped his wand with a sweaty, unsteady hand. His muscles tensed and his mind whirled with everything Peter Pettigrew, Bellatrix Lestranger and Severus Snape had driven into his mind. Patience. The right moment to strike. Spells whirled in his thoughts.

He would fight. He wouldn't give into the fear making him tremble. The Dark Lord was more powerful than any Druid. He would fight, and he would survive.

I will be the only one of his followers to fight the Old Lore at his side!

The Dark Lord stepped into the center of the circle and pointed his wand at the Master Druid. "Cedric McGonagall, do you accept a challenge for Mastery of your Circle?"

His face lit by the flickering eldritch blue of his staff, Cedric shook his head. "No. But feel free to pit your powers against mine, Abomination."

Voldemort laughed aloud, throwing his arms wide. For an instant, Draco was struck with the vision of the Dark Lord as a demonic conductor, each flick and cast of his wrist guiding the magic as a maestro guided an orchestra.

Draco wanted to run, to hide – even he could feel it, but he was frozen on place by fear of the Druids, fear of his Lord – and the certain knowledge that he was nothing to these men.

In that moment, Draco Malfoy did not so much learn humility as have it thrust upon him like an avalanche.

Voldemort thrust his wand forward. "Avada Kedavra!"

The blast of green light leapt out from Voldemort's wand but instead of the blinding speed and power of the Killing Curse, the magic was slowed and thinned, stretched into a narrow line of light. Cedric stepped aside and the thin green light splashed harmlessly against the stone behind where he had been standing.

Cedric invoked Power, and lines of light and white fire burned around them, flowing like liquid through and around the circles of stones. It was both hot and cold and neither; it was not quite like electricity and almost unlike the tingle of swimming through crushed ice.

The Dark Lord whispered, his wand moving in precise patterns, drawing symbols of blood-red light that hung in the air, humming discordant notes that set Draco's teeth on edge.

The Dark Lord flicked his wand negligently, and the runes flew through the air like missiles, unerringly finding their target, some slicing at Cedric's flesh while burned him. A few were absorbed by the Druid's fire, but most struck home.

The runes blasted the Druid to the ground, felling him like a great tree struck by fire and lightning.

Voldemort's wand whipped through a pattern as he cast the spell the runes had created an opening for.

"Abalieno strinxi vis!"

Draco didn't know the spell, but he felt its potency as the magic was drained from the air.

The fire of the Druid's Staff dimmed, but did not extinguish. With an effort of will, Cedric pulled himself upright and spoke Words of Unmaking, the air shuddering with thunder that had no sound; reality shimmered and threatened to snap where it did not bend as

McGonagall' son exerted his will upon worlds both magical and mundane.

Draco screamed and almost fell to his knees as he heard the Words. Blood poured from his ears and eyes, but he still held his wand.

The Dark Lord staggered under the weight of the words as they tried to Unmake what he had become.

Cedric held his free hand high in the air and bellowed a single syllable that rang out like the peal of a bell, silence falling as the echo faded into silence. The lines of light flared gold and poured into the Druid as he spoke.

He pointed the end of his staff at the Dark Lord.

Light dimmed until only the blue glow of the staff was visible; Voldemort was forced back, step-by-step as he gathered his own will, his mouth moving in the words of incantations that made Draco's hair stand on end.

Cedric uttered phrases that ran together, liquid syllables causing the air around his mouth to shimmer and twist. Voldemort's body trembled and shuddered, the strain apparent.

Finally, the Dark Lord seemed held motionless, frozen in time and in space, trapped by the Power of Old Lore.

"This is the difference between my arts and your magic, Abomination. I have no power that does not come from the natural order you have flaunted!"

With an inarticulate cry, the Dark Lord straightened and threw his arms out, as if throwing a great weight off his shoulders. "I am Lord Voldemort. I. Am. The. Dark Lord!"

Flickers of red light played around Voldemort, as if his aura were trying to catch fire.

Draco wanted to scream as the edges of their magic wracked his body. He convulsed, his insides feeling like they were being wrenched out of him.

He bit his lip hard enough it bled, and he forced himself to stay on his feet.

I will not fall to my knees before McGonagall's son!

He watched the contest between his Lord and the Druid, his mind reeling. The Dark Lord? Was the title more than an affectation, then?

Voldemort's wand flicked through the air, trailing blood-red tracers that drew lines in the dim light. "I have broken free of your precious natural order! Who are you to name me Abomination, Loremaster?"

Cedric was drenched in sweat and leaning heavily on his staff as he strained against Voldemort's magic; he opened his mouth to speak – whether incantation or retort Draco didn't know – and Voldemort's triumphant whisper rang out like the toll of a bell.

"Crucio!"

Cedric fell to his knees, his face contorted with the pain.

"Your arrogance will cost you your life, Cedric McGonagall." The Dark Lord spoke calmly, intimately. "You could have accepted my challenge, dueled me for Mastery of your Circle. With their power added to yours, you may very well have defeated me." He strode forward, a lithe shadow in black leather, black robes flowing behind him, red light flashing around him. "But your nobility," he sneered the word, making it sound like childish naiveté instead of a virtue to be sought, "compelled you to save them. To stand alone and pit your pitiful powers against the might of a true Dark Lord."

Draco was even more confused. A moment before, Voldemort had called himself 'the' Dark Lord.

Not for the first time, Draco Malfoy realized he was, quite possibly, in over his head.

He reveled in it.

The blue fire along Cedric's staff flickered, but did not die. His jaw was clenched shut and his body shook with the pain, his eyes full of hatred for the creature holding him prisoner with a single spell.

"I came to you in peace. I came to offer you a place in the new order I will build from the ashes of the world I shall lay to waste. I came to return to you the places of Power taken from your Order."

The Dark Lord took another step further and slowly twisted his wand.

"Your ancestral place. Your ancestral power. Your true purpose restored to you. I wanted nothing in return, Master Druid, nothing. I would have granted you all the aid my power could give you. All you would have to do is take back what is yours from those who stole it from you. You would not have to fight my war. You would not have to aid me. You would just have to take back what is rightfully yours."

Cedric had fallen to his knees, only his staff keeping him from writhing on the ground.

"Now, you kneel before me. All the Lore at your command, brought low by a 'mere' wizard. Once again, High Magic has triumphed."

Some of the Druids were no longer still as the stones they kept vigil beside; some of them looked between each other, eyes flicking between their fellows and the spectacle unfolding before them.

Voldemort's voice grew in urgency, now laced with the rage his followers knew to fear. "Now, because you are your mother's son, I am forced to destroy that which I wanted to preserve! Once again, what is my sacred calling is perverted because you failed to heed the lessons of those who came before you!"

A small whimper escaped Cedric. Blood dribbled from his mouth as he chewed his tongue and cheek and lip to keep from screaming. Draco wanted to laugh aloud. A Loremaster, one of the High Druids,

brought low by his Master. The dread Powers of Old Lore shattered by the wizard who had conquered death!

And he served that power.

I understand Potter so much better now. Dumbledore has this kind of power. As Dumbledore shares with Potter, the Dark Lord might share with me!

“You will die, Cedric. You will die knowing that it was not me or mine that brought harm to your mother, but the Ministry she serves. You will die knowing you have left those you swore to protect to die. You will die knowing the Power you have given your soul to is nothing. You will die knowing that you have failed.

“But I am not without mercy.” Voldemort breathed these last words, silence falling as their echo died. “Your sacrifice will save your Circle. I will not harm them. I give you my Word; I am a Dark Lord, bound to the magic as you are bound to the land. I swear upon that power I will harm none of your followers once you are dead. But I will break their power. I will break your Circle.”

Tears ran down Cedric’s face, but his face was defiant; enraged.

Draco saw movement out of the corner of his eye; one of the Druids had thrown back her cowl and swept her staff toward the Dark Lord, her mouth opening to speak even as the first hints of pale fire played around her hands.

“Silencio!” Draco snapped his wand around, and no sound came from her mouth. “Reducto!”

Her Staff exploded into splinters. Draco’s wand whipped through the air.

“Stupefy! Petrificus Totalus!”

The woman did not crumple as much as fall, her unconscious body frozen.

The Dark Lord turned to Draco. "Well done, young dragon."

It was a split second of distraction. Cedric stood and whirled his Staff, slamming back into the ground. "Ignis imber fulmen tempesta!"

White and gold lighting crawled along the ground from the bottom of the staff, climbing the stone arches. It leapt from one stone to another, completing the circle. Bolt after bolt of lightning slashed towards the Dark Lord, striking him again and again.

Draco felt the lightning sizzle his skin, and his hair stood on end.

Voldemort laughed and raised his wand, ignoring the lightning. A single flick of his wand dispelled it. Cedric's eyes widened in fear, and Draco saw as the Druid finally understood who he had challenged.

With the elegant grace of the conductor Draco had thought him earlier, he extended his arm toward Cedric even as the Druid's flames seemed to grow brighter, seeming to leech energy from the very air around him. He was gathering all the Power still at his command but his eyes told Draco all he needed to know: Cedric knew it would not be enough to stop the Dark Lord.

Draco caught the motion in the corner of his eye. Another of the Druids – a large man with a wild black beard – drew a bronze and iron knife from a sheath at his belt; pale shimmers of yellow fire crackled along the edges of the blade. Draco recognized the athame; his father had once had several as trophies mounted in his study.

Draco knew he wouldn't be fast enough this time. He seemed to be moving through treacle instead of air as he brought his wand to bear, the words of a spell forming on his lips.

The bearded Druid moved like a striking snake, stepping from his place in the circle, his arm jabbing forward, driving the point of the athame into Cedric's back.

Cedric gasped a strangled cry of surprise, pain and despair – it was like music to Draco's ears, the climax of the concerto the Dark Lord had been conducting.

The blue flames around Cedric's staff flared higher and leapt from the wood, flowing over Cedric and into the knife embedded in his flesh. From the knife, it crawled along the bearded Druid's arm until he was consumed in an aura of azure flame.

His eyes were wide and hungry, his face contorted in a perverse parody of fierce joy. Slowly, the blue fire became yellow.

The flame dimmed and flickered, until the only remnant of Cedric's power burned in the betrayer's eyes.

The body of Cedric McGonagall fell to the ground, leaving the bearded Druid standing with his knife outstretched.

"I am Alaric Duathan, and I claim his Power for my own! I am Master of this Circle. Are there any who would challenge me?"

Alaric was met by silence. He lowered his blade.

"You offer us back our lands and our purpose? The 'Forbidden' Forest?"

The Dark Lord smiled and gave a small bow. "I do."

"What of the school? What of Hogwarts?" Alaric was breathing hard, his face flushed with exhilaration and anticipation. "Will you stand with us, aid us in its fall?"

The Dark Lord slid his wand into his sleeve. "That, and more, Loremaster. I will return you to your former glory and power and I will laugh as those who cast you down kneel at your feet."

"Why should we believe you?" Alaric was breathing heavily, his own Power swelled with the addition of Cedric's. "Why shouldn't I call upon the Circle and destroy you where you stand?"

Voldemort smiled. It was the kind of expression people had nightmares about; it promised all the unnamable things that lurked in

the dark corners of every man's soul, but it was an empty and hollow expression.

"I wish to destroy the muggles, the mudbloods and the other filth that poison the magical world. The Old Lore is at the center of what we are – it is where we began and even now it defines what we have become. Who better to rule under me than those who command the most primal of magics? Who better to inherit the sacred grounds Dumbledore and his fools desecrate than those who first made it sacred?"

"What if we fail?" Another voice from the circle.

The Dark Lord tilted his head to one side. "I suggest you do not fail."

"We do not fail! We are not lesser magicians who play with parlor tricks and simple incantations!" Alaric held the bloody athame high.

"Excellent!" Voldemort crooned. "But there is now a price. It is a high price, Master Druid. Would you pay it?"

"Name your price, Dark Lord." Alaric held out his hand, his own Staff shimmering into existence.

"You – and you alone – of your Circle will swear yourself to me. You will accept my Mark." Voldemort walked forward slowly. "You will surrender Cedric McGonagall's staff to me and return the rest of his possessions to his mother. Lay his body at her feet. And you will allow any who wish it to walk free from this place."

"Why?" Alaric rasped. "Why should I let any who would walk away from what you offer live? You gave your oath to a dead man. I am not bound by it!"

Voldemort's laugh was a soft, cold sound. "Let them walk free, but strip them of their powers. Break their staves. Cast them from your Circle, and let them seek out Albus Dumbledore and tell him of what I have done. Let him fear what I will become."

Alaric pondered this, his eyes still bright with the remnants of Cedric's fire. "Your will be done, my Lord."

Voldemort held out his wand. "Then kneel, Loremaster."

End Chapter

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Revelation

Faint snatches of phoenix song called him back to the world.

His eyes opened and he leapt to his feet. His body twisted, falling into line as his feet touched the floor. His muscles remembered what his mind didn't, and he assumed the fighting stance Gracie had mercilessly drilled into him. He held his wand at the ready, a half dozen spells on the tip of his tongue.

"Harry?" A voice cut through the haze, and he caught a glimpse of copper hair as someone stepped in front of him. It was a voice he knew; a voice he wanted to hear.

An illusion. Or a dream? The last thing he clearly remembered was the Death Eaters. The pain of their spells wracking his body.

Something touched his arm; warm, soft fingertips sliding over his skin. Touching. Not holding. Not hurting.

"Ginny?" His voice quavered.

"I'm right here." Her voice.

His body relaxed, falling badly out of line. He took a step closer to her. Even in the dim light of a single candle, he saw her eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

"A dream. This is another dream." He was talking more to himself than her. She can't be here. She can't be where they can hurt her, too.

A gentle trilling of song, resonating through him.

Flashes of memory teased the edges of his thoughts with tantalizing hints of what had happened. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get the memories to hold still long enough to piece together

anything coherent. He was drifting, floating – as if he were missing an anchor he hadn't consciously known he'd had.

He felt the soft fingertips brush his cheek. "You aren't dreaming. This is real. I'm here."

"Here?" He blinked, his eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness. He saw the other two figures, standing now (had they been sitting, earlier? He couldn't remember.)

"The Burrow. You're safe. They can't get you here. I promise." The fingertips pressed harder against his arm.

He heard the hiss of a match, and saw a second candle flare to life; he saw a pair of faces looking at him over the flame.

Faces he knew. "Ron? Hermione?"

"It's us, mate," Ron answered hesitantly.

Another strand of phoenix song whispered, warm pinpricks tapping at the doors to the place in his mind where his thoughts had retreated. The song forced the doors open with gentle, insistent pressure.

Disjointed parts of memories connected with an almost audible snap.

Pain.

It was the first thing Harry became completely aware of. There was very little of him that didn't hurt.

His legs wouldn't hold him anymore. He collapsed, falling heavily to the floor and leaned his side against the bed, his back against the wall, shaking.

Ginny knelt beside him, her hand touching his bare shoulder. He flinched away. She pulled her hand back, hiding her face behind her hair, hiding the hurt in her eyes.

Copper tresses tickled his face.

Words stuck in his throat, threatening to choke him.

He focused himself, gathering what strength he could, and tried again to stand up. The pain nearly paralyzed him.

“Ohh...” He gasped, blinking sudden tears out of his eyes. “That wasn’t such a good idea...”

Ginny reached out and brushed her fingertips across his forehead, pushing aside his hair. “You okay?”

Harry tried to shrug, but found that hurt, too. “Sorta. Maybe. Not really.” Reality was slowly catching up with him, memories slowly being processed. “Why is it I’m not dead this time?”

Ginny paled and looked away. “Fawkes. Fawkes came with Dumbledore, and he saved you. You’re not okay though, not really. You have to drink a potion made from phoenix tears every day for awhile.”

Again, the golden-warm sound of phoenix song washed over him, the pain receding. He felt feathers tickle his ear, and he looked up into Fawkes’ eyes.

The phoenix nuzzled his cheek, crooning happily.

“Thank you.” He ran his hand down the silky feathers for a moment, before Fawkes pulled away, content to sit on the bed and whisper snatches of song.

“How long have I been out?”

Ginny looked nervous, as if unsure what to do with her hands now that she wasn’t touching him. “All day. You appeared early morning. It’s after dark, now.”

Hermione and Ron were kneeling next to him now.

He felt another hand touch him and he flinched away. Hermione tried not to look hurt, but he could see it on her face.

“Sorry. I’m a bit jumpy.”

She smiled weakly. He met her eyes and saw it there. Something they didn’t want to tell him. His eyes darted to Ron and saw the same on his face.

He let out a shaky breath. “Just tell me.”

“Dumbledore is here, Harry,” Hermione whispered. “He wants to talk to you...and take you back. To them.”

Harry closed his eyes and tried to force the tension out of his muscles. “I have to go back.”

“But...”

Harry cut Hermione off. “Dumbledore is right. I have to go back until he says I can leave. No matter how long that is.”

“I don’t think so, mate,” Ron said calmly. “We’re not going to let them send you back there so the muggles can have another go at you.”

Harry looked at Ron blankly. Hermione bit her lower lip and Ginny was still trying to figure out what to do with her hands.

“I survived this long. I’ll survive however long I need to.” Harry’s voice had a flat, dull quality to it that even he was surprised at.

You’d be surprised what you can live through. He almost said it, but didn’t think anyone else would appreciate the humor. He tried not to remember Vernon’s rage or the pain that came with it. It wasn’t even that bad before Hogwarts. He used to just...hit me. Not like that.

“You’re not going back there, Harry,” Ron said with a little more force in his voice. “You’re in a right state, not able to stand, barely able to move. You might just be one of the greatest bloody wizards to ever live, but right about now a flobberworm could knock you out.”

He shook his head. "I have to go back. That's all there is to it."

"No," Hermione said. "Yesterday afternoon, I went to go check on you. I saw where they're keeping you, and I met your Aunt. You are not going back."

Harry looked up at them. "Don't you see? I'm safe from him there, just like Hogwarts. If he could come and go from the Ministry, then there aren't many places he can't reach." He let out a long, slow breath. Talking was becoming more and more of an effort. "Umbridge sent the Dementors. The Ministry knows where I live, so Voldemort probably knows where I live...but he couldn't reach me there. I spent one night away...and look what happened."

"What did happen, Harry?" Hermione asked the question that had been plaguing them since he had appeared at Ginny's feet.

"I was too damn stupid to really understand what Dumbledore meant..." Harry seemed to almost be talking to himself. "I was too bloody tired of it all. It was just one night away so Dudders could go on a date without me around."

Ginny's eyes widened at the sound of his voice. His tone managed to imply that no one in their right mind would want him around, especially when it was something important.

Dudley. Gracie.

The emotional blow was like a hammer slamming into his gut. Were they alive? Had he left them to die or be taken by Voldemort?

"I was too worried about getting one night away. Just one night, and I'd be able to go back and make it through. Instead, I might have gotten Gracie and Dudley killed."

"But you did not." Albus Dumbledore exercised his well-known talent for timely entrances and stood just inside the still-closed door.

Harry stared up at the Headmaster, his eyes betraying his desire to believe the Headmaster and the damaged trust that would not let him do so.

"You're going to take me back, aren't you?" There was no way for Harry to hide the fear in his voice, so he didn't bother trying.

"I believe the blood protections are essential to keeping you safe," Dumbledore said carefully. "But now is not the time to speak of such." He looked at Harry, his eyes twinkling. "We will speak later. For now, rest and enjoy your time with your friends."

Dumbledore managed a graceful exit, his twinkle and his smile not in the least affected by the glares Hermione and Ron both leveled at him.

Ginny hadn't taken her eyes off Harry. She didn't say a word. She reached out and brushed her fingertips across his cheek, a feather-light caress, as if to remind herself he was still there.

He flinched at the touch before he could stop himself.

Green eyes met brown, and Ginny tried to snatch her hand away, but faster than any of them could see, Harry caught her hand in a surprisingly gentle grip.

"It's okay." His voice was a harsh whisper. "I'm going to be okay."

Ginny pressed her hand against his cheek. "You'd better be."

This time, he let her draw her hand away, smiling sheepishly. "Any chance of some help getting back into bed?"

Ron and Hermione moved to help him, but Ginny glared at them until they backed off – or, at least Ron backed off. Hermione ignored the glare. "Honestly, Ginny! You're going to hurt him worse if you try to do this on your own! Ron, you take his legs and I'll take his shoulders. Ginny, get on the bed to help us. Harry, don't you dare give me that look. If you don't cooperate I will go get Mrs Weasley!"

Ron and Harry both shrugged helplessly and did as they were told. Ginny glowered, but climbed onto the bed, somewhat mollified she was ending up on the bed with Harry. It didn't take them long to get Harry situated and as comfortable as possible.

Ron pulled over a chair and looked straight at Harry. "I don't know why you have to stay there. I don't rightly care. You're not going back alone, if at all."

Harry closed his eyes and breathed out slowly. "It's not a choice, Ron. It's something I have to do. It's a blood-protection spell of some kind and it protects more than just me. It protects the Dursleys."

"Why do they deserve that protection?" Ginny asked softly, her finger running along the edge of a bruise. Harry exerted every shred of willpower he had not to flinch again.

"Do they deserve Voldemort or his Death Eaters torturing or killing them?" Harry whispered back. "No one does. He wants to get at me, and he knows if he hurts them he hurts me. It's not their fault I was dropped on their doorstep and it's not their fault Voldemort is out to kill me."

"No, it's not," Hermione said calmly. "This isn't about whether or not you're going back there. This is about whether or not you're going back alone." She stood next to Ron. "Open your eyes and look at me, Harry."

He did, meeting her gaze, forcing himself to breathe like Gracie taught him. He had to keep his emotions under control.

"Harry James Potter, I have stood by you for five years against Death Eaters, escaped convicts and deranged Defense teachers. I have been there for you even when you didn't want me to be. What makes you think I will abandon you to those people? What makes you think any of us will? They may not deserve the danger they are in, but they do not deserve the kindness and respect you are showing them, either. Nor does that danger give them the right to torture, imprison, starve or otherwise hurt you."

Harry kept looking straight at her. "You're right. You have stood by me through more than anyone could ask you to. So has Ron and so has Ginny. But the rules are different there. I can't fight back. You can't fight for me. I have to be allowed to stay there...and they would never allow you to stay. They have the upper hand. All I have to do is survive." He looked away, his voice dropping to a whisper. "If they get to you too, then who do I have to put me back together?"

Ron gave Harry an unreadable look. "Do you just try to ask depressing questions?"

Harry sank back against the bed and closed his eyes. "Everyone has to have a hobby."

"I'd suggest a new one." Ron deadpanned back.

Harry grinned weakly.

"Harry, Dumbledore left some pain potions here. Do you need one?" Hermione asked.

Swallowing hard, Harry shook his head. He was hurting, but he didn't want to take anything that would make it harder to think. He could endure the pain. "No. I'll be okay. Just some water, if you have it."

Hermione brought over a cup of water. Ginny helped Harry sit up, trying not to notice how his muscles tensed under her touch. He took the cup from Hermione and sipped the water, wishing his mouth didn't taste like dried blood.

At least it doesn't taste like all the potions they probably had to force down my throat.

He leaned back against the pillows Ginny put behind him and just concentrated on his breathing. In and out. He closed his eyes and just breathed until the pain receded.

He didn't see the flickers of green light briefly dance around him. Hermione glanced around, but Ginny didn't appear to see anything, and Ron was staring at her instead of Harry or Ginny.

If there was one thing she'd learned being friends with Harry Potter, it was that weird things often got explained in their own time. It just took research and finding the right time to corner Harry about things. And now was definitely not the right time. There was no telling how her moody friend would react to being told he was glowing in the dark.

But Harry would be mad at her if he thought she was hiding things.

"Harry...what was that?"

"What was what, Hermione?" Harry asked, opening his eyes again.

Ron and Ginny also looked at her curiously.

She licked her lips. "Harry, for just a second, you...glowed."

"Glowed?" Harry asked weakly.

Fawkes trilled softly.

Hermione nodded. "There was a green light around you when you looked like you were falling asleep."

Ginny shrugged. "I didn't see anything."

Ron nodded. "I didn't either, but Hermione's more observant than anyone else I know."

Ginny kept herself from drawing Harry closer to her and Hermione chewed on her bottom lip. Ron stared at Harry as if looking for evidence of the strange green glow.

"Right after you appeared, you were glowing green," Ginny said. "I thought it was just the aftereffects of the magic that brought you here."

“Which we still don’t understand,” Hermione said. “How did you bring yourself here? It couldn’t have been apparition or even portkey, because the Burrow’s wards are set to only allow certain people in and out.”

Ron shrugged. “Magic is just that. Magic. There’s so much about it we don’t know about it. We’re still just students, for everything we’ve done. None of the Order seem too upset or confused about how Harry got here. Why should we be?”

“Because we need to know. Knowledge is power and the more we have, the better we do,” Hermione stated flatly, being careful to avoid mentioning it had been a lack of knowledge had gotten Sirius killed.

“Then we’ll find out like we always do,” Ron said. “We can’t do anything about it now.”

“Harry was glowing in the dark, Ron. We can’t just ignore it,” Hermione had come a long way in five years. She no longer sounded prim when she made those kinds of statements. Now, she just sounded impatient.

Harry sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t like it. I guess it’s something else to ask Dumbledore about.”

“Will he answer us, though?” Ginny asked.

No one said anything.

Ron broke the uncomfortable silence. “So other than getting nearly killed – again – how was your summer?”

“Oh, the normal.” Harry had a quirky half-smile. “Though I’d like to know how Hermione ended up in Little Whinging.”

“You saw me?” Hermione sat on the side of the bed next to him.

“Yeah. I saw you,” he answered. “I wasn’t sure it was really you. I thought I was hearing things when you called my name.” He couldn’t make himself look at her.

Harry. Nasty, common name. Aunt Petunia's voice sounded in his head. Fawkes trilled gently, and he was able to look over at her.

"It was," Hermione whispered. "I was looking for you."

"Why?" He sounded amazed.

"Because someone needed to." Hermione answered matter-of-fact, meeting Ginny's eyes over Harry's head.

Ginny smiled at Hermione and concentrated on keeping her hands in her lap.

"I..." he let out a slow breath. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Hermione paused. "You looked lost, Harry."

He shrugged half-heartedly. "I was, I think. I heard you call out to me...I wasn't sure if you were real." He struggled to find the right words, but was only able to whisper: "Thank you."

"You'd have done the same for any one of us," Hermione said. "And you're not the only one with a 'saving people thing'."

"See?" Ginny put a hand on his arm before she thought about it, wincing as his arm twitched – but he didn't pull away.

Hermione smiled, her eyes bright with unshed tears. She looked over at Ginny and mouthed three words: 'You were right'.

Ginny smiled back.

"Who was the woman with you?" Hermione asked, trying to change trying to avoid having to talk too much about her summer.

"Gracie." His voice was strained, and he looked down at his water. He didn't want to talk about it. Not until he knew what had happened to her.

“You can tell us later. Rest, okay?” Ginny ran her fingers through his hair. “It’s our turn to talk.”

Harry forced a smile. “I still want to know how Hermione ended up in Little Whinging.”

Hermione looked pleadingly at Ron, who shrugged helplessly. She sighed. Apparently, there were some things not even she could get out of.

I am a fool.

Albus Dumbledore sat at Molly Weasley’s kitchen table and stared at the Burrow’s kitchen clock, acutely aware of every second ticking away.

Time. His long fingers wrapped around his teacup. I have so much of it, yet so little to share.

How much longer could he wait? How many more seconds could he give them before he had to decide what he was going to do? He knew Harry would be safe from Voldemort at the Dursleys. He knew he could make Harry safe from the Dursleys, themselves. But, for the first time, it truly seemed the wrong decision.

How else was he supposed to keep Harry safe?

There was an idea, tugging at the back of his mind like a small child tugging at his beard. He didn’t want to acknowledge it, because of what it would mean.

I have been a coward. I have hidden from the consequences of what I chose for him.

It had been easy to hide behind his position, his title – to take the role of a distant teacher. Give Harry aid, but not so much as to invest himself in the situation.

He had been afraid he would fail once again. And caught in that fear, he had failed.

My fear has cost him so much. He could very easily – and somewhat rightly – claim it was his fear of Voldemort knowing he and Harry were closer than Headmaster and pupil that had kept him from being as close to Harry as he should have been, but it was likely Voldemort assumed closeness where none existed.

His fear had almost cost them everything. His absence from Harry's life had given Voldemort the opening he needed; his reluctance to act, to use his power, had left Harry to the mercy of the Dursleys and Dolores Umbridge.

I have chosen what was easy, not what was right.

It had not started that way. His original motivations for placing Harry with the Dursleys were valid and he still felt, right.

There was no way he could have taken Harry himself, and he was the only one in the wizarding world who could have protected Harry from the Death Eaters seeking to restore their master and the dark wizards seeking to step into Voldemort's place. The Ministry would never have allowed him to raise or teach Harry – they would not have released him from the Oath. Nor would the Ministry have left Harry alone if he had been raised anywhere in the wizarding world.

The blood protections had kept Harry safe – from everyone except his family.

He had no idea what Harry's mental state was; he knew too well how much damage had been inflicted on his body. He had seen the extent of the damage and had been appalled at how much of it had happened before the Death Eater attack. He had seen the way Harry was distant with his friends, even as they tried to comfort him. They couldn't know how what Harry had gone through would affect him. There was no way for them to know.

Fate had taken everything from Harry; there was little left for Voldemort's prophesied nemesis to cling to.

How could this have happened? The Order should have been watching. They should have prevented this.

His final instructions to the Order had been clear. Harry's safety and well-being were paramount. Even if he could not leave the Dursleys, Harry was to be protected. He knew he was asking much of them; he had said as much. But he had believed them capable of it.

It disturbed Dumbledore he could not leave, even for half of a summer. He had explained to the Order the necessity of his quest, why he had to leave Harry in their care. He had trusted Severus Snape to balance out the desires of many in the Order to take Harry from the Dursleys and had hoped the rest of the Order would moderate Severus' attitudes towards Harry.

I should have been able to leave him in their care and know they would act before this happened.

If he were honest with himself, he was angry and disappointed with the Order – and very proud of Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Tonks. I cannot remain angry with them, and I cannot allow this to pass without consequence.

He was tired. He knew many saw him as a symbol, and that many in the Order saw him as a savior; the one who would defeat Voldemort. And until Harry was ready to take up the mantle of being the 'Chosen One,' he would have to remain the symbol and the savior.

I should have told him earlier. I should have prepared him better. It was painful to realize what his desire to give Harry some happiness had cost the boy, but he had only realized the depth of his error after Harry had destroyed his office.

He had found the opportunity to discuss his errors with others on his travels that summer, and had been asked a simple question: how did he know Harry would not have found happiness knowing the Prophecy?

He could have eased Harry into it, told him something of it his first year and more of it his second; he could have found ways for Harry to be trained, even if the Oath prevented him from training Harry himself.

Albus was appalled at himself. His short-sightedness had cost Sirius Black his life. I must trust Harry to defeat Voldemort, but I could not trust him with the knowledge of what was occurring around him?

If Harry had known of the Prophecy; if Harry had known why the Order was doing what they were doing, Harry might not have acted as he had.

If I had shown trust in him, then this summer might have gone differently.

Albus had not realized how his avoiding Harry would be interpreted by others. What had been done to protect Harry had caused others to doubt the boy. It had caused others to think Albus doubted the boy – which could not be farther from the truth.

That, at least, could be fixed. If Harry still trusts me at all.

With a shake of his head, Albus pulled himself from his reverie. He still had to decide what to do with Harry. But as he had seen with Harry's abortive mission to the Department of Mysteries, the right choices could only be made with the right information.

Which Albus feared he did not have.

He had spent the balance of the day seeking that information. He had checked his instruments at Hogwarts and discovered the blood protections were far weaker than they should have been. It was possible for the blood protections to be fully renewed if Harry returned to Privet Drive and kept there for the rest of the summer, but Albus found himself reluctant.

The pain and trauma Harry had experienced there was far too great to return him to his relatives. If he was right about the boy's mental state, returning there might break him.

But why were the protections so weak? Their weakness did not fit with what he knew of Harry's summer from the Order. Even though Harry spent most of his time at the gym, Dudley had been with him. The protections should have been fully renewed.

Nymphadora Tonks was almost as broken as Harry, her guilt over doing nothing was crushing her. Bill Weasley was angry and felt betrayed by the Order and Molly Weasley was no longer a member.

Most disturbing was the split he had seen. There were those who saw Harry as Severus did – an arrogant, misguided boy who was a waste of the Order's time. Then there were those who were intensely loyal to the boy and felt the Order had failed him.

If only I had been able to speak to Severus. The Potions Master was nowhere to be found – presumably, he had been called to Voldemort's side.

Finally, Albus' brief visit to the Ministry had revealed that Fudge had set one of his personal Aurors, along with a squad of Hit Wizards, to investigate the attack.

Even more, Fudge had, at the recommendation of Percy Weasley, re-activated Alastor Moody's commission to help them find Harry and – to Dumbledore's great surprise – Gracie McAllister.

It didn't surprise him Gracie had killed several of the Death Eaters. Nor did it surprise him Gracie had escaped. He would have been more surprised if the Death Eaters had managed to overcome her. It did surprise him that Cornelius Fudge wanted to find her.

To say nothing of young Percival allowing a man he knows to be loyal to me to be involved in the investigation.

Solving the puzzle of Percy Weasley would have to wait.

His mind raced through scenarios and permutations, plans within plans, subterfuges and strategies, subtle manipulations of circumstances and half-truths that could be spun, but in the end there seemed to be only one solution.

Why does this solution fill me with such trepidation? It was not fear of Voldemort or danger to himself or Harry. He was confident enough in his own power to know his solution would mean Harry would be as protected as he ever had been.

Still, there were complications. Cornelius Fudge had manipulated the legalities of the situation to make it impossible for him to keep Harry out of Ministry hands unless he was willing to make both of them fugitives. There were ways to neutralize the Minister, but he would have to be very careful.

Or remove him entirely.

He needed to get his hands on the letter Petunia had shown Hermione; it would give him the leverage he needed. But how?

He left the matter of Ginny Weasley. He did not know how she had managed to get letters through to Harry when everyone else had failed.

The vision of Voldemort she and Harry had experienced disturbed the Headmaster deeply. Even with both of them sharing a connection to Voldemort, the Dark Lord should not have been able to reach either of them, much less both, not like he had. He wasn't sure how the Dark Lord had done it, or what it meant, but he knew it boded ill.

Harry must master Occlumency. He did not or could not learn from Severus before. I hope he will try again. If he still refuses to allow Severus to teach him, I must risk teaching him myself.

But first, Harry had to recover.

A soft pop! startled him from his thoughts. A tiny figure stood before him, dressed in a poorly knitted sweater and cap, mismatched socks on his pointed feet.

"Dobby?"

The house elf nodded, looking far more nervous and anxious than Dumbledore had ever seen him. "Dobby is a free elf, yes? Dobby is not bound to any but Dobby?"

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "It is true. You are a free elf, Dobby, bound to none but yourself."

The house elf sucked in air, and squared his tiny shoulders. "Then Dobby must be talking to Professor Dumbledore, sir."

Albus nodded again, turning his full attention to Dobby. "I am listening."

Dobby stared at his feet. "Dobby has been a bad elf, Professor Dumbledore, sir. Dobby has been breaking wizard law and has been helping Harry Potter."

Taking Dumbledore's silence as acknowledgment, Dobby continued: "Dobby has been making sure Harry Potter has been getting his letters from his Miss Wheezy, and has been fixing Harry Potter's glasses. And giving Harry Potter soap." The house elf paused and looked...embarrassed? "Harry Potter is a great wizard, Professor Dumbledore sir, but even he cannot survive such a place without his Dobby."

Dumbledore sat for a long moment, sorting through the dozens of questions that sprang to mind. He chose his first question carefully, realizing he had the answers to most of his questions from this most unlikely source.

Such loyalty. Dumbledore paused and stroked his beard. "Dobby, what of other letters coming to Harry? Or other letters Harry sent?"

"Harry Potter sent letters to his friends when he first went to the muggles, but Professor Snape took them. Dobby was only able to get Harry Potter's Miss Wheezy's letters. Dobby was not fast enough to get the rest from Professor Snape."

Dumbledore nodded, but was confused. It was possible Severus had held the letters to keep Harry's friends from breaking the isolation

imposed on him by Fudge, but there were other, better ways of doing that.

“Will you tell me what you saw this summer, Dobby?”

Dobby shuffled, not meeting Dumbledore’s eyes. “The muggle man, Professor Dumbledore, sir. Beating Harry Potter he was, like Harry Potter was bad elf! Harry Potter was beaten every morning and every night, sir, but Dobby took care of him as much as Dobby could.”

Again, Dobby’s choice of words were not lost on Dumbledore. He forced his anger down, calling on over a hundred years of self-control to keep himself thinking. Like a bad elf.

It had been worse than he feared. What were Fudge and Umbridge playing at, giving the muggles leave to treat Harry that way? Why would even they have done that?

The Dursleys could have done far less to Harry and Fudge would have still been able to wrest control of Harry from me. Was it Voldemort’s influence? And if so, what had Voldemort wanted to accomplish? Surely, he must have known the blood protections kept them from killing Harry?

If their treatment of him was so grave, how did he remain functional, let alone able to train? Even as he thought the question, he realized a possible answer, and it chilled him to the bone.

“Dobby, did you ever heal Harry of his injuries?”

Dobby shifted uncomfortably. “Sometimes, Dobby be healing Harry Potter, but elf healing not good for wizards. Dobby not need to heal Harry Potter much though. Harry Potter’s magic kept Harry Potter from being too hurt or too tired or too hungry, and Harry Potter’s Gracie helped him touch his magic.”

Dumbledore blinked. Harry’s magic? Is it possible? The very thought of it was frightening – the implications were almost too much for even him to grasp.

Dobby seemed on the brink of tears, but collected himself with obvious effort. "Harry Potter is in terrible danger with the Muggles! They hurt him and lock him up! They make the blood magics weak by making Harry Potter spend a night away!"

Dumbledore rocked back in his chair. A night away. They made him spend a night away. Harry merely being away from the house for a night would not have affected the wards, not this late in summer, but if the Dursleys had forced Harry to spend a night away, it would have invoked the Magic of Intention.

Which meant he had to know what the Magic of Circumstance was.

"Can you tell me where he was?"

Dobby nodded emphatically, his hat slipping askew. "Yes! The big, loud muggle uncle made Harry Potter spend last night with his Gracie! The circle of blood was broken and the Dark ones knew him. They found him and hurt him. Dobby was not powerful enough to stop them. The Dark ones were touched by the Old Lore."

There was fear in Dobby's voice; a fear that Dumbledore understood all too well. A fear he shared. The Old Lore. With even a little such power at Voldemort's command, the blood magics are the only thing that could protect Harry.

Ahh, Tom. You never cease to amaze or surprise me.

"How is it that I do not feel the circle of blood being broken?" The question was mostly to himself, but Dobby answered.

"Harry Potter is a great wizard, great enough even He Who Must Not Be Named could not survive without Harry Potter's blood!"

He sat there for a long moment, just looking at Dobby. So small. Unseen and considered insignificant. Yet, without his loyalty to Harry, the boy might not have survived the summer.

The blood was weakened, but it was enough for Voldemort to avoid breaking the protections while striking through them when they weakened.

“What else have you done, Dobby?” Dumbledore asked.

“Dobby has taken Harry Potter’s things from his Gracie’s to the muggle house, because Dobby heard Professor Dumbledore sir saying Harry would have to go back there.”

Dumbledore wondered what Gracie thought of Harry’s things vanishing from her flat and how the Dursleys would feel about Harry’s things suddenly appearing in their home.

Loyal, if perhaps not as attentive to the small things as one could wish. But like Hagrid, his loyalty makes him far more valuable than he might seem.

“Dobby,” Dumbledore leaned closer to the house elf, “do you wish to continue helping Harry Potter?”

The first few hours after he woke would later become some of Harry’s best memories of the summer before his sixth year.

Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione spent the next few hours telling the tales of their respective summers, starting with Hermione. Although Ron had already heard about Hermione’s family, Hermione hadn’t told him everything. This time, she came clean, re-telling every insult, every prank and every comment.

Ron and Harry wore matching angry expressions – and the sight of her two best friends angry on her behalf went a long way to healing some of Hermione’s wounds. Watching them, Ginny suddenly realized the depth of emotion running between the three, and wondered if Hermione realized just how angry her two best friends were.

“Maybe next summer we should go visit during your family reunion,” Harry muttered darkly. He was so intent on being upset over how

Hermione had been treated, he didn't notice Ginny running her hands through his hair.

"Good idea," Ron agreed, his voice almost a growl.

"Oh, you two!" Hermione grabbed both their hands, smiling brightly. Ginny wasn't sure Hermione realized how serious they both were about going to the family reunion.

Ron talked about re-doing the kitchen and learning to cook. Harry was looking forward to getting to see both Ron's workshop and the work he and Ginny had already done on the Burrow – Hermione was effusive in her praise of it, making Ron blush.

Ginny talked about the Order watching her, but she left out the fights with Charlie, because she wasn't ready to talk about that.

When they got to the events of that morning, Ginny took over, whispering the story of Bill's fight with the Death Eaters and of her and Harry's fight with Voldemort. From the haunted look he gave her, he remembered it all too well.

"Thanks, Gin." He looked at her a moment longer, and she nodded at him – it was a barely perceptible movement, but it was enough.

Eventually, Harry started to drift off, his head almost resting in Ginny's lap. She just smiled at him, running her fingers through his hair, enjoying the moment, and relishing the show of trust, knowing Harry wouldn't have let himself fall asleep if he didn't feel safe.

Harry had almost fallen asleep when Remus Lupin poked his head in. He smiled at the sight of Harry and Ginny.

"Professor Lupin?" Harry asked groggily, looking up at his father's friend.

"Heya, cub," Remus said. "Glad to see you're awake."

"Mostly," Harry grumbled. He let out a long, slow breath before forcing himself to sit up. "We'll be down in a couple of minutes, I guess."

Remus nodded and closed the door behind him.

"You're not going back," Ginny said, her hand grabbing his arm.

"Ginny..." He pulled away, not looking at her. "I don't think it's a choice. I'm just glad I got to see all of you. I'm honestly a bit surprised I didn't wake up in Privet Drive with a half dozen Aurors guarding my bed."

Ron grinned. "We didn't give Dumbledore much of a choice about us seeing you. Ginny'd already snuck in here. Hermione and I just followed Dumbledore around until he agreed to let us see you before he took you."

Hermione smiled over at Ron. "It was Ron's idea. If we're all here with you, it'll be harder for him to take you without us."

Ron shrugged. "Weasley thinking. Strength in numbers. I figure we go down there together, and we just don't let him chase us out. No matter what."

Harry almost laughed. Ron and Hermione agreeing on something is bad enough. Add in Ginny, and I'm not sure what will happen...

"The sooner we go down, the sooner you can get back to sleep, Harry," Hermione said gently.

Harry nodded. "All right. Let's go."

Slowly, he climbed out of bed, grateful his legs would still support him. His muscles still ached, but he found he could stand on his own this time.

Hermione was a little surprised how fast Harry was recovering his strength. She wasn't a healer, but she had read a lot about magical

healing. Harry should have been weak as a kitten, not ready to walk down the stairs, albeit shakily. To say nothing of glowing in the dark.

Looking a little embarrassed as he realized he was dressed in just his training pants, Harry glanced around. "Er...anyone seen my shirt?"

Ron shook his head. "Sorry mate, but it was a lost cause. You're lucky you're not starkers – you were in a bad way."

"So I hear," Harry muttered dryly.

He followed them out the door, blinking as the brighter light assaulted his eyes. Hermione went in front of him, and Ron helped support him down the stairs. Ginny was behind him, but every few steps her fingertips would graze his back.

At the foot of the stairs, Molly Weasley rushed over to him, catching him in one of her infamous smothering hugs. For the first time, Harry hugged her back, letting her hold on for a moment. For once, it felt good just to be held and protected.

After a moment, she pulled back, and looked at him. "How are you, dear?"

Harry's smile was slightly forced. "Better, now that I'm here...but I should talk to Dumbledore."

"If you must." There was a sour expression on her face as she helped him sit in one of the chairs next to the table.

Harry let out a slow breath as he sat down, taking a moment to look around at the kitchen. Hermione had been right – Ron had done good work. The cabinets and counters were now the color of dark honey, matching the re-done baseboards and re-finished table and chairs. The floor gleamed – only the battered sink and stove remained to remind him of what the kitchen used to look like.

He also couldn't help but notice that the remodeled kitchen was very crowded right then. Fleur and Charlie were sitting so close to each other they were almost sharing a chair, holding hands – when did that

happen? – next to Arthur Weasley. Molly had taken a seat across from her husband, next to Kingsley Shacklebolt. Bill was standing in the corner farthest away from Fleur and Charlie. Tonks was next to him, leaning against his shoulder, and Remus was in the opposite corner.

“Nice work, Ron.”

“Thanks,” Ron said from the doorway, where he, Hermione and Ginny stood, their eyes fixed on the Headmaster.

I should help Ron out...pay for supplies, buy them the things he can't fix...

Tonks smiled weakly at him. “Wotcher, Harry.”

Harry smiled back. “Wotcher, Tonks.”

There was something strange in the Auror's eyes, something he couldn't quite place. It looked like guilt, but he didn't know why she would be feeling guilty.

Maybe because they're sending me back to the Dursleys?

Harry turned to his mentor, unsure of what to say, of how to explain how he came to be at the Burrow when he should have been at Privet Drive.

“I...” Again, Harry had to force the words out. He could feel Charlie and Fleur staring at him, their eyes trying to find something he couldn't name. “I owe you an apology for your office.”

It was hard to say in front of the others, but he needed to say it anyway. This was the first time he'd spoken to the Headmaster since that night. I won't forget what Gracie taught me. I won't.

“None needed, Harry. I daresay I deserved quite a bit more than that.”

Relief washed over him; Dumbledore didn't seem mad at him. Teacher and student looked at each other a moment longer – their relationship was far from mended, but they were both at least willing to try. They didn't have a choice.

Uncomfortable with everyone staring at him, Harry started to try to stand. He was going to face the Order on his feet, no matter how weak he was.

Never let them see you weak. It was a lesson he'd learned well growing up and one Hogwarts had reinforced.

Dumbledore held up his hand, and Harry saw he was smiling. "Sit for a moment, Harry. You have been through quite an ordeal."

He sagged back into the chair. "I'll be all right though, now." He looked over his shoulder at his friends.

"Yes, I believe you will be." He folded his hands in front of himself. "Most of the injuries you sustained at the hands of the Death Eaters have been healed, though there are a great many old injuries we could not heal yet."

At Harry's surprised – and guilty – look Dumbledore simply smiled again. "I am now aware of much of your summer, Harry, and I know it has been...difficult for you. I have been away, searching for answers to many questions." To Harry's surprise, Dumbledore looked slightly uncomfortable. "Even so, it would have been very difficult to intervene due to Ministry concerns."

Harry and Dumbledore shared a look, and Harry nodded. "I've been informed, sir."

"Ahh, yes." Dumbledore nodded. "I understand Undersecretary Umbridge paid a visit to the Dursleys?"

"She did," Harry answered. "She paid them a lot of money."

"Yes." Dumbledore sighed. "She played to their weaknesses, to manipulate them into treating you even more poorly than is their

custom. If you were to be rescued by any member of the Order or anyone associated with the Order, Cornelius Fudge would be legally able to remove you from their custody, name you a ward of the state, and place you under the care of any he so chose, such as orphanages or foster care.”

Harry wanted to sink through the floor. “So if you rescued me, I’d be his prisoner instead of yours?” He practically spat the bitter words.

Dumbledore almost winced. “Yes.” The headmaster let the silence sit for a heartbeat. “The Minister would aim to prevent you from encountering undue danger, such as you have encountered in the past.”

Harry took a deep breath and forced himself to think things through. If I were ‘protected’ by Fudge I couldn’t protect my friends. I couldn’t face him...he would be able to come to me. I would have no protection from him.

It was a chilling thought.

As long as I’m alive, I can fight Voldemort.

As long as the Dursleys weren’t going to kill him, it was too great a risk for him to fall into Ministry hands. Was that why the Order had let the Dursleys do what they’d done?

I’m the only one who can defeat him. It was harder to accept each time he thought it. But am I the only one who can stop him?

“So what does me being here mean?”

“You left of your own volition, with no coercion or involvement on my part. You were attacked, despite Ministry protection and took yourself, under your own power, to a place of safety. There is nothing Cornelius Fudge can say or do.”

Harry felt a sense of relief, but still had one other question: “What about the magic I cast?”

Dumbledore shook his head. "Undetectable. The Death Eaters set a trap for you, including casting wards to prevent the Ministry from knowing magic was in use."

"How did they set up the trap?" Hermione asked.

"When Vernon Dursley forced Harry to spend a night away from the Dursleys, Voldemort was able to get the location of the gym from Harry's mind, and sent his Death Eaters to capture Harry." He looked right at Harry. "We are lucky the Death Eaters were sent to torture and break you, not kill you. The few we were able to interrogate were quite clear on that point."

Several people in the room flinched at the Dark Lord's name.

"Makes sense," Harry spat. "The bastard doesn't want to face me, not until I'm weak enough I can't fight him."

"Unfortunately, yes. However, Voldemort did not count on you being able to escape his Death Eaters, nor did he expect the level of protection we have placed around the Burrow."

Harry nodded, remembering what Ginny and Ron had said about Bill fighting the Death Eaters.

"William and Charlie both had placed wards here when they first arrived this summer, and when William felt those wards being tested first as you came through and then again when the Death Eaters arrived. He proved far more than a match for the Death Eaters. Thanks to Miss Granger's missive, I was able to get here in time to drive the Dementors away as you and Miss Weasley were able to defeat Lord Voldemort."

There was a brief stir as Dumbledore said the name again.

"However, the ease with which they found you without the blood protections is all the more reason for you to return to Privet Drive for the rest of the summer."

Harry's shoulders slumped, and he sagged into the chair. He hadn't wanted to admit it to himself, but he had started to hope he wouldn't have to go back. I should have known better.

Most of those gathered were silent from shock and anger. Fleur and Charlie looked satisfied, while Molly looked like she was going to leap between Harry and Dumbledore. Ginny's mouth worked, but no sound came out. Ron and Hermione both took a step into the kitchen.

Harry forced himself to first sit up straight, and then stand. He swayed on his feet, dizzy and lightheaded. He gripped the back of his chair to keep from falling, praying silently Dumbledore had an easier way of traveling than Portkey or Floo powder. "I guess I'm ready when you are."

"So are we," Ron drawled, walking up to stand next to Harry. He grinned back at his mother. "Have Tonks bring my stuff when she goes on duty?"

Molly nodded. "Certainly, dear. I'll send her with some food, too, and things for Ginny and Hermione. I doubt Harry's aunt will want to fix dinner at this hour."

Hermione and Ginny were on either side of him, both gripping one of his hands; Ron had stepped in front of Harry.

"I do not think that will be necessary, Mister Weasley." Dumbledore smiled kindly at Ron, who didn't budge.

"Harry will be staying here, then?" Molly asked in a voice that dared Dumbledore to argue with her.

Harry looked up at her pleadingly before Dumbledore could answer. "Mrs Weasley, please don't make this any harder than it already is."

Mrs Weasley looked over at Harry. "Harry, dear, do you want to go back?"

Harry stood there silent for a long moment before looking at the floor. "No. But what I want doesn't have anything to do with this."

Molly's lips tightened into a thin line.

"Why?" Ginny stood in front of Dumbledore. "Why does he have to go back there? Do you just like letting him get beat on?"

"Easy one, imp." Bill slipped between Dumbledore and Ron, brandishing an empty tea mug. "Professor Dumbledore has set a very powerful and very complex blood-affinity protection charm on Harry. Specifically, it protects him against You Know Who." He walked over to the stove, frowning at the empty tea kettle. "I'd wager it's a set-spell. It fades with time and needs a certain amount of exposure to direct blood relations to recharge and stabilize the protections."

To everyone's surprise, Dumbledore, seemingly very amused by the entire display. "Very good, William."

Bill conjured water from his wand into the tea kettle and lit a fire under the kettle. "I also imagine that you don't interfere much at all to keep from drawing attention to him. He is reporter-free and fame-free all summer long...but if Albus Dumbledore, or anyone associated with him spent too much time around a house in an all-muggle neighborhood in Surrey, someone would be bound to notice."

Dumbledore nodded. "Again, you are quite correct, William."

"Damn straight I am, old man." Everyone in the room blinked at Bill's flippant attitude. "And I'm also right about this: Harry going back won't matter one whit."

Dumbledore looked at Bill long and hard. "Please, William, explain."

Bill sat down, waiting for the tea to steep. "I won't let you take Harry out of this house. Your wards around him are failing – my wards around the Burrow won't break as easily as what's left of the brittle blood magic around Harry, and even if you send him back, the wards won't recharge."

"Why is that?" Dumbledore asked lightly, his eyes twinkling brighter than ever.

“Simple.” Bill answered a second time. “For Merlin’s sake, old man, let Harry sit down before he drops.”

Dumbledore nodded to Harry. Grateful, Harry sat. Ginny and Hermione were still holding onto him.

“Go on, William.” Dumbledore too sat back down. “I have recently been made aware I have something of a blind spot when it comes to Harry.”

Bill waved his wand, levitating the teapot over to him. He poured himself a cup, and raised an eyebrow at Dumbledore.

“Please.” The Headmaster flicked his wand, conjuring a cup with the Hogwarts crest on it.

Harry was so confused he found himself thinking how nice it was magic made making tea such a fast endeavor.

Bill poured a cup of tea for Dumbledore, and levitated the teapot back to the stove. Everyone waited in silence.

Bill looked straight at Dumbledore. “If you try to take him back to Privet Drive, I will break what’s left of the blood protections on him.”

“Any why,” Dumbledore asked mildly, sounding rather pleased, “would you do such a thing when you know it would put Harry in quite a bit of danger?”

Bill took a sip of tea. “Because he would be in more danger going back to Privet Drive than if I broke the protections and he stayed here.”

“You sound quite sure of this,” Dumbledore said softly, staring hard at Bill. He was obviously waiting for something. “Why?”

“Are you telling me you don’t know what goes on there?” Bill asked. “Are you telling me you don’t know Harry’s uncle has spent the summer beating him? Starving him?”

Many of those gathered looked at Harry in shock. Tonks looked guilty. Molly, Ron, Ginny and Hermione all looked between Harry and Dumbledore determinedly. Kingsley looked thoughtful.

"I am all too aware of those things," Dumbledore answered, his voice taking a slightly cold edge.

"Then...why are you making him go back?" Hermione asked.

"I had no intention of taking Harry back tonight," Dumbledore answered. "Nor any other night. Harry will not be returning to Privet Drive."

Everything seemed to happen at once.

Harry sagged in relief, wincing as Hermione and Ginny hugged him.

Molly was smiling and crying, and Bill was looking like someone hit him with a board. "He's not?"

Charlie leapt to his feet. "If he stays here, wouldn't that put all of us – the Order – in danger?"

Fleur looked terrified.

Dumbledore waited a moment for the commotion to pass. "I am gratified to see the love and support Harry has, but I had no intention of returning Harry to Privet Drive. Ronald and Ginevra convinced me of that earlier today."

Ron and Ginny grinned at each other proudly, and Molly rushed over to hug both of her children. Just for good measure, she gave Harry and Hermione hugs, too.

"And I assure you," Dumbledore's tone took on a dark edge, "the Dursleys will be dealt with." He paused to take a sip of tea. "However, I am very disturbed by what has occurred this summer while I was away."

The Headmaster's eyes swept the room, and more than a few present were quite pleased when they saw Charlie and Fleur squirm uncomfortably at the sense of power and purpose radiating off Dumbledore. "My parting instructions were very clear. Harry Potter was to be protected at all costs. I am aware of the difficult line I asked you to walk and of how much risk you would be in if it became necessary to defy Fudge. However, if the Order was aware of the abuse Harry was suffering, no matter the difficulty of interference, a way should have been found to protect him. I am gravely disappointed only Miss Granger was willing to contact me when things with Harry became as bad as they were. Had I known, something would have been done."

"But I didn't know how bad things were, Professor," Hermione said. "All I knew was Ginny was worried."

"Your faith in your friend was well-founded, Hermione," Dumbledore answered. When his eyes met Hermione's, she felt a surge of confidence. "As my faith in making you a member of the Order was well-founded."

"What were we supposed to do? Challenge Fudge directly? Make Harry and whoever rescued him a fugitive?" Charlie asked. "He would have been real safe that way."

Dumbledore smiled, and there was something in the expression that made blood run cold. "Not even Cornelius Fudge would dare to challenge me directly, if I were to bring evidence before the Wizengamot he had a hand in the abuse of any child. Which, I firmly intend on doing. Cornelius has gone too far, and had I not had been forced to be elsewhere earlier this summer, I would have already taken steps to remove him as Minister."

Bill looked at Dumbledore. "I did try to do something, and was told by Snape and Shacklebolt not to interfere. That my 'bias' concerning Harry was interfering with my judgment. Tonks was informed if she interfered, she would be removed from guard duty! Snape did remove her, when Hermione got here yesterday!"

Dumbledore frowned. "And what of the rest of you?"

"I wasn't told!" Molly yelled. "I wasn't told anything! I quit the Order, Albus Dumbledore, because I refuse to be part of anything that allows what has happened to these children to happen! I didn't know he was being hurt until last night!"

"I admire your decision, Molly," Dumbledore said, suddenly looking old and worn. "But this will have to be addressed with the Order as a whole."

Harry couldn't believe what they were discussing. If most of the Order didn't know, then what about my glasses? Or the soap? Does that mean they weren't ignoring me?

He was still mortified that any of them knew how weak he had been. How helpless he'd been against his uncle, while Voldemort had raped his mind night after night.

"You didn't have to do that for me, Mrs Weasley," Harry said, still looking at the floor. "It's not as bad as all that. If not for the attack, I would have gone to Hogwarts and no one would have had to know."

Molly walked around the table to look at Harry. "Harry, dear, look at me."

Harry forced himself to look into her eyes. He fought hard for control of himself, but he still flinched when she put her hands on the side of his face.

"Harry Potter, it is not your fault. You have no reason for shame. No reason at all. You did not deserve it. Your aunt and uncle were wrong, Harry." She looked up at Dumbledore. "Albus, we need to finalize plans for Harry. Order business, even this business, can wait."

"Very well," Dumbledore stood, vanishing his cup with a wave of his wand. "Harry, you and I shall have to speak at length sometime very soon. But Molly is correct. You need to rest. You will be able remain here for a day or two at most, but something else must be arranged. Charlie was right about the danger."

Harry just nodded.

Dumbledore stood. "William, would you do me the courtesy of a few minutes of your time? I believe I have need of your particular insight."

Bill shook his head. "Not mine, Professor. Theirs. I just played off something my sister hinted at earlier." He gestured to the three teenagers huddled around Harry's chair.

Dumbledore smiled, the twinkle back in his eyes. "Please, William, I have not been your Professor for several years. I think I prefer 'old man'."

Bill grinned. "Fair enough, old man."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very well then. Is there anything else?"

Molly, looking rather proud of her children, nodded. "Harry's things, Albus."

He paused. "I shall have Minerva collect them."

Ginny shook her head. "I think one of us should go. We know what he'd want."

Dumbledore sighed, and then smiled. "Of course. You and your brother," he gestured to Ron, "will accompany Remus Lupin or Miss Tonks."

"I'll do it," Tonks volunteered quickly.

"Very well," Dumbledore nodded. "Once I am finished with William, you may go. For now, you, Remus and Charlie are on guard duty. William will relieve you when he and I are finished. I want three on watch at all times."

Charlie, Remus and Tonks all nodded to Dumbledore and headed out of the kitchen. Fleur, looking very confused and very lost, wandered after Charlie.

Arthur Weasley stood and smiled at Harry. "I am very glad to have you here, Harry. But I think I will leave you in the capable hands of my wife and children and sleep. I do have work in the morning."

"Thank you, Mr Weasley," Harry said faintly, still trying to catch up with what was happening. After Arthur had kissed his wife and daughter goodnight and left the kitchen, Harry looked up at Dumbledore in confusion.

"Professor," Harry asked quietly, "if no one from the Order helped me, then who fixed my glasses and brought me the letters from Ginny?"

Dumbledore smiled. "A most loyal and caring friend risked much to help you."

If anything, Harry was even more confused.

"You have the eternal admiration of a certain house elf. Somehow, he knew to see to you this summer. He did what he could. Please do not be angry he did not do more."

Harry shook his head. Why would he be mad? He was just confused that Dobby had helped him in the first place.

Ron and Hermione shared a knowing look. Ginny was lost. Who was Dumbledore talking about?

"Dobby," Dumbledore told Ginny, "is the former Malfoy house elf Harry set free his second year. He was of some assistance to Harry in solving the mystery of the Chamber of Secrets, as I recall."

"Oh. Right," Ginny said uneasily, not sure she wanted the discussion to turn to the Chamber, or her role in it.

Dumbledore met her eyes and sighed. "I owe you yet another apology, Miss Weasley. I gave the Order instructions to watch over you this summer and look for signs Tom was attempting to enter your mind. I asked them to do so for your protection and your safety, not because I suspected you were a danger to us. They did not do as I asked, and for that, I apologize."

Ginny shrugged, trying not to be upset. "Thank you, Professor."

Dumbledore turned to Ron. "I owe you an apology as well, Mr Weasley. I did not treat you as well as you deserved this afternoon, and for that I am sorry."

Ron, a bit overwhelmed at being apologized to by Albus Dumbledore, just swallowed and nodded. "No worries, Professor."

Finally, Dumbledore turned to Harry.

"Harry," Dumbledore gave him a pointed look. "Do not blame yourself for what has happened. To you, or to others. And Harry, Dobby took the liberty of moving your things from Gracie's to Privet Drive. Nothing she gave you is lost."

Harry nodded, relieved once again. Though how the Headmaster knew Gracie had bought anything for him when he hadn't known Harry had been with Gracie was confusing.

Then again...it is Dumbledore.

Mrs Weasley smiled, and stood up to walk Dumbledore out. "Thank you, Albus. Now, then, you and I need to have a brief word about tomorrow..."

Harry sat in his chair in shock as the door closed behind Molly and Albus.

He was staying with the Weasleys. He didn't have to go back to Privet Drive. Possibly not ever again.

Strangely enough, he found he had mixed feelings about that. He and Dudley...they had almost connected.

And they are my last blood relations. The last connection to my parents, except Dumbledore and Remus Lupin.

He stared at the fire under the teapot, focusing on the flame, trying to feed his emotions back into it, letting the fire devour the pain, letting the void leap into being.

Hermione looked at Bill. "What would have happened if you had broken the blood protections?"

Bill set down his teacup. "Do you want an honest answer? I'm not sure you'll much like it."

"Please," Ginny said. "I've always accepted what you say, even if I don't like it."

Bill looked to the other three. "Can the rest of you agree to that?"

They all nodded.

"Harry would have been in worse shape than he is now. Breaking the charm would have hurt him...badly. Such blood magics are powerful. Even if he never sees his relatives again, that blood-magic will always be a part of him."

The silence was deafening.

"How? Why?" Hermione asked. "If it protected him, even a little, then why break it? I mean, what if you were wrong, wouldn't the best place for Harry be with his relatives? He wouldn't have gone back alone, after all."

Bill looked at Hermione. "You an only child?"

"Yes, why?" Hermione was getting exasperated.

"It's nature versus nurture. I agree with Mum. I don't think it's worth protecting Harry against You Know Who if we break him in the process."

Harry was starting to get very uncomfortable, but forced himself to remain inside the emptiness.

“You would have dueled Dumbledore, wouldn’t you?” Ron asked, incredulous. He looked like he wasn’t sure if he was proud of his older brother or thought he was mad. Or both.

“No.” Bill shook his head. “I would have broken the charm. But considering the situation, you three – Ron, Ginny, Hermione – would have had to decide which side to take.”

All three looked at each other. There was no question where they stood.

“But I want you to understand,” Bill said, “that I don’t think Dumbledore is wrong, or that he wants to see Harry hurt. In fact, I think he cares about Harry as much as the rest of us...as much as Mum, if that’s possible. He did what he did to protect Harry from the nature – and nurture – of the wizarding world.”

“I think I’m missing something,” Ron said. “You’re talking as if Dumbledore’s spell was flawed.”

“It was,” Bill said, starting to explain, but even as he opened his mouth, Hermione spoke, her voice both terrified and shocked.

“V-voldemort! He used Harry’s blood to bring himself back!”

Blood of my enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe...

Harry stared incredulously at Hermione.

Bill nodded. “Exactly that, but it’s very complex. Blood-affinity charms are reinforced both through the nature of the spell – the relation of blood between Harry and his...”

Bill looked to Harry.

“Aunt. Aunt Petunia was my Mum’s sister.”

Bill nodded. “The relation of blood between Harry and his aunt. The nature of the blood provides the protection from the physical magics

and many of the magics of intention. But if you involve circumstance, and the ephemeral, or abstract powers?”

“Then, of course,” Hermione spoke slowly, “the spell must be reinforced by the nurture of the blood affinity through the magic of intention. His Aunt wished him harm, so the protection was weakened.”

“What does that have to do to with anything?” Ron asked. “How is what his relatives feel about him relevant?”

Hermione sighed and crossed her arms across her chest. “Magic is governed by intention and circumstance. Dumbledore intended to protect Harry from V-Voldemort with the spell. Harry’s Aunt’s intentions are part of the circumstances of the spell; when Voldemort took Harry’s blood, he made himself part of the spell. Now, because Petunia’s intentions towards Harry match Voldemort’s intentions – Dumbledore’s spell can’t hold. If only one of them wanted to hurt them, the spell would have been fine.”

Ron still looked confused, but Ginny translated. “You Know Who hates Harry. Petunia hates Harry. Dumbledore’s spell counted on Petunia not wanting him dead. Circumstances changed, and she does. Spell fails.”

“Oh,” Ron muttered.

“But wouldn’t Dumbledore know all that?” Ginny asked.

“I’d imagine so, but I don’t think Dumbledore knew about what was going on this summer. I don’t think he ever dreamed the Dursleys would want to hurt Harry they way they have.”

The look on Ginny’s face was unreadable.

Harry winced. I guess Dumbledore wasn’t watching me very closely when I was at home before Hogwarts.

Hermione nodded slightly, sitting, lost in thought. Bill stood, and put his teacup in the sink. He walked out, and Ginny cursed under her breath, going over to turn off the stove.

Harry sighed. He was starting to get tired, and he wanted to tell them what to get from Privet Drive before he fell asleep.

“Ginny? Ron?”

“Yeah, mate?” Ron asked, looking at Harry quizzically.

“Do me a favor, when you head over to my Aunt and Uncle’s? Tell Dudley I’m all right – and that he was brilliant. That he isn’t what he’s afraid he is.”

Ron coughed, looking a little uncomfortable. “Uh, Harry? Maybe you ought to write the bloke a letter? And since when did we like your cousin? Thought he was a git worse than Malfoy.”

Harry shrugged. “People change. Dudley did. He saved my life this morning.”

Was it really just this morning?

He looked over at Hermione. “Any spare parchment and quills, ‘Mione?”

She started to look affronted at the assumption that of course, she would have extra ink and quills, then laughed. “Yeah, sure, Harry.”

To no one’s surprise, Hermione produced a bit of parchment and a pre-inked quill from somewhere on her person.

He wrote a quick letter to Dudley, surprising himself a bit with some of what he had to say.

Still, it has to be said.

He rolled up the parchment, and sealed it with a bit of wax from a nearby candle.

I have to tell them. They'll find out when they get there. He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"Everything's down in the cupboard under the stairs. If you have to leave everything else, be sure to get the black backpack and the shopping bags with it. Please."

Ron and Ginny looked at each other in confusion. "Sure 'nuf, but what's so special about that backpack?"

Harry forced back a rush of emotion, shaking his head. Until the moment the question had left his mouth, he hadn't realized how much Gracie – and her gifts – had meant to him.

Damn...I wish there was a way to get word to her. She'll be worried...and I owe her so much.

"It's a gift from a friend." He spoke softly, still staring at the fire. "I owe her a great deal."

"That woman I saw you with outside the gym? Gracie?" Hermione looked at him curiously.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Gracie McAllister. She took care of me this summer."

Ginny smiled, and rested her hand on Harry's arm. "I'm glad someone did."

Harry nodded, looking a bit lost. "So am I."

Molly came back into the kitchen soon after Bill left, and insisted on feeding all of them at least a light supper. Despite being hungry, Harry found he was having trouble staying awake, and almost passed out into his salad.

"Come on, you." Ginny tugged at his arm. "Let's get you back into bed."

Groggily, Harry carefully stood to follow Ginny, blinking his eyes. I guess I'm more tired than I thought.

Hermione started to go with them, but Ron grabbed her wrist and shook his head. She tried to pull away, but Ron gently held her back until Harry and Ginny had started up the stairs.

"No. They need a moment to themselves."

Hermione yanked her hand away – this time Ron let go – and scowled. "A moment to themselves?"

"Yeah. That," Ron said calmly. "They've been writing to each other all summer, and I don't think they've ever been alone with each other before, at least while Harry was conscious. How can Ginny even have a chance if they can't even have a moment to themselves?"

"Have a chance? Ron, are you daft? Your sister is obsessed with Harry!"

Ron shrugged and sat back down, dragging the remains of Harry's dinner in front of him. "Maybe. I dunno. She's my sister. She likes him. He's my friend. He's lonely in a way we can't fix. Either things get bugged because she couldn't try or things get bugged because she did. At least this way, they both might be happier."

Hermione sat down next to him. "I think I liked it better when you had the emotional range of a teaspoon."

Ron grinned at her. "Maybe it's a big teaspoon."

Hermione glowered. "Ron, a teaspoon is a standard size. It can't be a 'big' teaspoon or a 'little' teaspoon."

Ron chewed thoughtfully. "Why not? Giants might have teaspoons. They'd be bigger, wouldn't they? Or house elf teaspoons. They'd be smaller."

Hermione muttered something under her breath.

Ron grinned and brandished his salad fork triumphantly. "Ha! I did it! You have nothing to say to that! I finally out-logged you!" He stood up, still brandishing his salad fork. "Just wait until I tell Harry and Ginny!"

"You can't," Hermione said smugly, crossing her arms.

"Why not?" Ron said, looking slightly deflated.

"Because they're having a moment to themselves."

"Oh. Right." Ron sat down to finish Harry's dinner.

Ginny didn't bother to re-light the candles in Ron's room; slender filaments of light from the full moon slid between the curtains, casting the room in wavering dappled shadows, giving just enough light to see by. Harry had made it up the stairs without her help and into bed without her help, but she wasn't ready to leave.

She still wasn't sure he was going to be there in the morning. She paused, just a step away from the bed. He was painfully thin; she could count his ribs. He was still covered in bruises, half-healed burns and welts that stood out against his pale skin.

He almost died today. He almost died in my arms today.

She blinked, surprised to feel the sting of tears.

She silently passed him a tray of potions he needed to take. There were quite a few of them, all labeled with labels magicked so they could be read in the dark. The Phoenix Tears potion, pain potion, Blood Replenishing potion, a potion to help with the malnutrition and dehydration, potions for bruising and muscle repair; the list seemed to go on and on.

He drank each one quickly, almost violently, screwing up his face at the taste. Finally finished, he let her hand him a glass of water to wash them all down with.

She stepped away to put the tray and empty water cup back on Ron's desk.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching her watch him. He forced his eyes to focus as best they could.

She was standing in streams of moonlight, her waist-length hair pouring like a halo of liquid fire around her. Her pale skin seemed to almost glow as she looked at him. Dressed in a pair of small shorts and a tank top, there was more of that glowing pale skin exposed than he was used to seeing on any girl, much less Ginny.

And he saw blood on her legs and on her shirt.

His blood.

"Ginny? Are you all right?"

She blinked at him. He was sitting there, only just recovering from nearly having died – again – and he was asking her if she were all right.

But she saw the honest concern in his eyes. It took a second to realize what she had, but once she became aware she had looked into his eyes, she knew she was in trouble. The moonlight made his bright green eyes seem to shimmer with an inner light that caught her and tried to steal her breath.

"No. I'm not." She choked the words out around a lump in her throat. She stared at her hands. "This morning was...I don't know. It was awful. Worse than anything else that's happened to us. To any of us. Even Dad last year. You appeared, out of nowhere, with that stag...and then the Death Eaters and the Dementors came. Bill fought off the Death Eaters and held the Dementors back until Dumbledore arrived."

Ginny was looking at him, but her eyes and face were unreadable. "You didn't tell us. You didn't tell me. You promised me, just like I promised you. That you'd tell me! You wouldn't protect me!" She stepped forward, and he could see the anger in her eyes. "They were

killing you by bits and you were just going to bloody well let them, and damn the rest of us!"

Harry shrugged. "Yeah. Pretty much."

She couldn't believe him! He had promised! And he was just shrugging away what had happened to him, as if it didn't matter?

He didn't see it coming; her hand was a blur. His face stung, and he flinched, pulling away. He closed his eyes and bowed his head.

"Oh god, Harry, I'm sorry..." He heard the tears in her voice, but he didn't look up. "Please..." she whispered. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...I'm just...oh god, please look at me!"

He looked up and forced a smile. "It's okay, Gin. It really is."

She was shaking her head. "No, it's not...I can't believe I did that..."

"No." He reached out and took her hand in both of his, tugging slightly until she was standing in front of him. "No. It's okay. I'm okay."

His eyes betrayed the lie.

She looked away from him, tears streaming down her face. She felt like she'd been stabbed in the gut as the fragile trust they'd built crumbled. What did I do? Why did I do that? It was as if it hadn't been her moving her hand.

"Ginny." She heard his voice. It was quiet, but there was the same strength in it she'd come to associate with him. "Look at me."

She forced herself to look up, hyper-aware of his hands holding hers.

"It's okay." Had he leaned closer to her, or had she moved forward? "I'd be some kind of hypocrite if I got mad at you for being mad at me for hiding something from you."

"But...I..."

His eyes seemed to stare through her. “You’re forgiven.”

Her fingers curled around his. “Why didn’t you say anything? You wrote all those letters...”

He forced himself not to look away, but let go of her hand. “I didn’t know how to say it. Or if it would mean anything...I had to stay there. I really did. I didn’t have a choice.” He wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince her, or himself. “I wasn’t trying to hide it...not on purpose. I just didn’t know what to do about it.”

Her hand reached up to touch the red spot where she’d slapped him. Slowly, as if not realizing what she was doing, she leaned forward and kissed his cheek softly.

He smiled, for real this time. As her hand started to pull away, he reached up and gently grabbed her wrist, forcing her to stay close to him. He wanted to reach out his other arm, put it around her waist and draw her close – but he didn’t. He didn’t know if he should.

It only took him a second to realize what was going on in his head. He could even pinpoint how it happened. He knew part of what he was feeling was because he was weak, and Ginny was there, offering the affection he desperately craved. He was also dizzy, his thought fogged by the pain potion. But there was something more there – something akin to what he’d felt for Cho Chang, but it was something that ran much deeper. It was almost as if it were a different feeling entirely.

But it doesn’t matter. She wants to be with Dean Thomas. She’s Ron’s little sister, and I’m half-delirious. And there’s the Prophecy. The bloody Prophecy.

He felt himself start to pull away.

“No. Don’t close up on me!” Ginny reached out desperately, and had a hand on his shoulder; the feel of her skin on his was enough to give him gooseflesh. He flinched again, but he reached up and put his hand over hers before she could pull away.

“Please...I’m just...I don’t know...”

She scooted even closer to him, so close their bodies were almost touching. “No one’s ever really touched you, have they?”

He shook his head, his voice raspy. “Not like this, no.”

Tentatively, Ginny’s arm slid around his waist; the feeling of her skin against his was wonderful, so warm and so soft...his stomach did flip-flops. He felt himself tense, but he didn’t pull away, no matter how strong his gut instinct told him to.

This time, he did slide his arm around her waist, hesitantly keeping her close to him. It seemed the right thing to do. She was a blur in the moonlight, bright red and pale. She seemed so small, so delicate this close to him.

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” he murmured. “Just so you know.”

Ginny smiled at him, her hand brushing his hair away from his eyes. He didn’t flinch his time. “You’re holding a girl. Don’t tell me the great Harry Potter hasn’t ever held a girl before?”

He swallowed. “I think this is a first.”

She moved even closer, so the fabric of her shirt brushed the skin of his chest. She could feel him trembling, skittish. “It’s not a bad thing, is it?”

He heard the note of pleading in her voice. “No, I guess not,” he rasped. “I’m just not sure why I’m doing it. Or that I should be.”

Ginny’s other arm wrapped around his waist. “Comfort. There doesn’t have to be any reason but that, Harry. You deserve a bit of comfort every now and again.”

Part of him wanted to jerk away and hide, keep her from getting too close.

"Is...is that all this is?" He was frustrated to hear his voice croak. Part of him wanted to just pull her against him and revel in the feel of her, of someone close.

She froze. She could lie. She could tell him she was over him. That this was only friendship, only comfort.

I promised. If nothing else, I will give him the truth. If no one else will, I will.

"Not from me," Ginny answered. "But I think you know that by now."

He drew in a sharp breath. "I don't know how I feel, Ginny. I like you, as a friend, if nothing more. But...I'm not myself. Tomorrow, I might regret letting myself do this. Letting myself hold you."

Her hand stroked his back, marveling at the feel of the muscles she'd never noticed before. "I'm not asking for anything from you. Nothing at all. You give me what you can, even if that is nothing at all. Just..." it was her turn for her voice to croak, "please don't ignore me anymore."

"I won't." He relaxed ever so slightly, letting her lean against him. He was still shaky, still afraid. But he would give her this much, even if it was all he could give.

Ginny sank into his embrace, letting herself enjoy the moment for what it was. It was all she could do.

End Chapter

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Midnight Mission

“You changed your mind about Harry going back.” Bill stated flatly as he walked up next to Dumbledore. “Why?”

They were standing on the back patio of the Burrow, enjoying the cooler night air. There was a faint shimmer to that air – the wards Bill and Albus had cast were strong enough to cause distortion visible to the naked eye.

“Do you ever stop and look at the stars simply to look at them?”

Bill frowned. “Sometimes. Why do you ask?”

“It is a wonderful thing, to simply stop what one is doing and enjoy the moment for what it is,” Dumbledore said.

“Stop and smell the roses, you mean? Sure. I guess so.” Bill shrugged, confused by Dumbledore’s tangent.

“I imagine you do so more often than you realize,” Dumbledore said. “The luxury of taking small joy from the simple things of life is one of the many things most people take for granted.” He stepped off the porch. “But not Harry.”

Bill sighed and shook his head. “No. Not Harry. But what does that have to do with you playing us all back there?”

“Everything,” Dumbledore answered, sitting down. “And nothing.”

Bill sighed and sat next to him and dug around in his robes, pulling out a wooden pipe and a small pouch of tobacco.

Dumbledore smiled. “I can see you have worked quite closely with the Goblins. But would you have the requirement of an extra pipe?”

Bill blinked in surprise as Dumbledore produced a small pipe of his own, and quietly passed over the pouch. "Goblins are fond of their pipes."

"Aside from the occasional sherbert lemon, I find very little to match the pipe for pure pleasure," Dumbledore said, filling the bowl. He passed the pouch back to Bill. "It is also quite conducive to thinking, of which I must do a great deal of."

Bill took the pouch back and filled his own pipe.

Dumbledore produced a small flame on the end of his finger and puffed his pipe to life, producing a small cloud of sweet smelling smoke. He proffered his lit finger to Bill.

"Neat trick. I have to use my wand," Bill said, lighting his pipe.

"It is a useful skill, if one favors the pipe," Dumbledore said as the flame vanished.

There was a long silence as both men sat and stared at the stars, smoking.

"You're going to teach him, aren't you?" Bill asked softly, failing to hide the bitterness in his voice.

"No," Dumbledore shook his head. "I cannot teach him anymore than I could have taught you. Alas, he has not even asked." He paused, cradling the pipe in both hands. "I am sorry."

"I know," Bill sighed. "But it still hurts. I grew up dreaming about it, you know? I spent hours in the library my first month at Hogwarts, looking for the ceremony. I was so proud of myself, sneaking into your office. I remember being terrified. I could feel the magic gathering as I spoke the words, and I knew I was on standing on the edge of what would become the rest of my life. I said the right words the right way." His smile was as bitter as his voice. "And then you said no."

“And then I said no,” Dumbledore drew on his pipe, blowing a single, thick smoke ring. “Worse, I told you that you had the power and the ability and I still would not train you. I wanted to very much to say yes, to pass the knowledge down. To be forced to turn you away remains one of the greatest failures of my life. Such is the irony that there are now two I could pass my legacy onto, and yet I am bound to a fool’s oath.”

Bill blew a streamer of smoke through Dumbledore’s smoke ring. He remained silent, letting the old wizard talk. It was a bittersweet realization of a childhood dream, to sit next to Albus Dumbledore and hear him speak of himself.

“It appears I have now failed again. I had thought the Order strong enough, wise enough to watch over him while I was gone, because I knew when I came back I would have to ask him to make decisions no child should have to make.”

“Why Harry? Why is he at the center of this?” Bill knew better than to ask Dumbledore what decisions Harry would have to make; the old wizard was too fond of his secrets to share that. Yet, there were still questions he could get answered.

“That knowledge is not mine to give. I will, if nothing else, respect Harry’s privacy.”

Bill nodded. “Fair enough.”

Again, they sat in silence, a cloud of smoke gathering around them.

“It will take me time to determine all that has passed while I was gone. But at the same time, I must find a way to protect Harry. The blood protections are, by necessity, a Greater magic. The moment Petunia’s intentions changed, their power waned. Yet, Harry was unmolested by Death Eaters and Dark Lords until he spent a night away from his blood relations.”

Bill groaned. “You-Know-Who can’t find him. He can know where he is, but he can’t find him and can’t get to him, no matter how powerful

or how weak the protections are. It's not about making him invulnerable or hidden, it's about making him untouchable."

"Yes." Dumbledore nodded, smiling slightly. "It is a fine distinction. Voldemort can know where he is, can even be standing next to him, but he could not touch Harry while the protections are active and powerful. Nothing of his power – or those touched by his power – can touch Harry. It is why Voldemort always chooses to strike soon before Harry must return to Privet Drive. The protections are at their weakest."

"Nothing touched by his power..." Bill muttered around the pipe between his teeth. "Bloody brilliant. No one carrying the Dark Mark can touch him."

"Unless their intentions are not harmful to Harry," Dumbledore added.

"Making Harry the perfect litmus test for Death Eaters who defect to our side or those we suspect of being Death Eaters. It's why you trust Snape."

"I have many reasons to put my trust in Severus, few of which are based on any sort of litmus test." Dumbledore waved away Bill's subtle probe.

"So why could Dolores Umbridge visit him?" Bill wondered.

"Because the blood protection were at their lowest ebb. I imagine she found her visit quite uncomfortable, but manageable. When the protections are at such low potency, much is possible." Dumbledore paused, waiting to see if Bill would make the next leap.

He wasn't disappointed. "So if the protections aren't recharged and Harry's here, that means we're a target because they can find him here – or anywhere. To say nothing of Harry being vulnerable when he has been protected before."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. As the protections are weak, it is far easier for Voldemort," he gave Bill a look, silently chiding him for

using a euphemism for the Dark Lord, “to attack Harry himself. Easier,” he gestured with the pipe before tamping the tobacco with a pipe tool that seemed to appear out of thin air (and very well might have), “but as long as the protections remain unbroken, still difficult. Which is why I could not allow you to break the protections. If you had tried, I would have had to stop you, and you have power and skill enough that my doing so would have harmed you.”

Bill shook his head. “I could have broken them before you could have stopped me. I break blood charms on tombs all the time. I can break even Greater magics easily these days.”

Dumbledore looked at him in surprise. “Then you truly have walked the path you sought, if you can do such.”

The eldest Weasley looked sheepish and turned away from Dumbledore, breathing out a cloud of smoke. “Coming from you, that means a lot.”

“I am glad my inability to teach you has not deterred you. It gives me hope that the old ways and old knowledge will not die when I do.”

It was Bill’s turn to give Dumbledore an enigmatic look. “I think you’d be surprised.”

“Perhaps I would be,” Dumbledore murmured.

“So what can I do to help you protect Harry?” Bill asked, watching the smoke swirl around them. “You said it yourself. I might not be crazy-brilliant enough to use a Greater magic for a simple protection spell, but I’m not helpless, either.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “There is little you can do but what you are already doing.”

“I don’t believe that,” Bill said. “This isn’t your burden to bear alone. We’re all in this fight.”

Dumbledore shook his head and took another draw off his pipe. "The burden of protecting Harry will fall mostly to me. He will be safe enough here for now, but after that, I must find another way."

"You already have an idea, don't you?"

"I do. It is one that will serve more than one purpose, though I will be sorely tempted to break my oath, regardless of the consequences." Dumbledore coughed slightly. "Goblin tobacco. It has been many years since I smoked it."

Bill smiled wryly. "Like their tea, it has a kick."

"Indeed. Next time, you shall have to try some of mine. Pineapple. Quite tasty."

Bill raised an eyebrow, but was pleased Dumbledore didn't think this was the last time they would smoke together. "I'm sure." He paused, puffing. "You can't do this alone."

"I must," Dumbledore said. "This summer, if nothing else, has taught me there are some things I cannot ask others to do."

Chewing on the bit of his pipe, Bill realized another result of the Order's mishandling of Harry. Dumbledore's faith in the Order was drastically weakened.

"That doesn't mean there aren't some things the rest of us can do. You have to sleep sometime, old man. Let me help."

Dumbledore's stare froze Bill in place. "Are you sure of this? The danger you will be in is great."

Bill met his gaze calmly. "This is the path I wanted to walk. This is part of what I wanted to become. I'm already in this. I'm already in danger. I will protect Harry."

"This goes well beyond any such calling you may have, William. This delves into places even you have not been. Of any, I would choose you or Minerva to carry this burden. You both have the skill and the

knowledge to understand what it is that has been set into motion...but once you start down this path, there is no turning back."

"Only a fool walks into the future backwards." Bill shrugged. "There's never any turning back, from anything you begin. You can backpedal, but you never truly go backwards."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very well then."

- 0 -

Harry had fallen asleep with his head in Ginny's lap when Hermione poked her head in a couple of hours later. She frowned disapprovingly, but Ginny just met her eyes calmly.

Why are so many people against my being with Harry? What have I done, what has he done, that we don't deserve a chance?

"Tonks is ready to take you to get Harry's things." She paused, her expression softening. "I can go if you want to stay here."

Ginny bit her lower lip, staring down at the young wizard asleep in her lap, but shook her head. "No. You've seen where he was. I have to see it for myself."

If he can't talk about it, then maybe if I see it, I can understand.

Hermione nodded. "Might I suggest a quick shower and a change of clothes? You should borrow some of mine, so you look as muggle as possible." Ginny opened her mouth to argue, but Hermione cut her off. "You've still got his blood on you."

Ginny didn't want to delay any more than she had to, but Hermione was probably right. As usual. "Fine. But I don't see why I shouldn't show up on their doorstep covered in his blood. This is their fault. They should see some of their handiwork."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at Ginny. "Are you going because you want to help Harry or because you want to start trouble with his relatives?"

Ginny ran her fingers through Harry's hair. It wasn't a question Hermione should have had to ask. "Why do they get to get away with this?"

"Because we got outsmarted by Cornelius Fudge and his toad." Ron walked inside, barely glancing at his best friend lying in his sister's lap. "We've got bigger fights to be fighting. Like against You Know Who."

Ginny slid away from Harry, who groaned in his sleep, one hand reaching out for her. Her fingertips grazed his palm as she looked at Hermione.

"Stay with him? I don't want him to wake up alone."

Hermione nodded. "Of course. Just be quick. And careful." Her eyes were on Ron as she said the last. He didn't notice – he was digging through his drawers for clothes.

Bundle in hand, he slipped out of his room to change, probably in Percy's old room. With one last look at Harry, Ginny dashed out of the room, and Hermione pulled a chair up next to Harry's bed.

- 0 -

Ron and Ginny stumbled a bit as the Portkey released them outside Number 4 Privet Drive – in the backyard, of course. It wouldn't do to materialize where everyone was watching. Tonks Apparated behind them with a soft pop of displaced air.

"Ready?"

They both nodded, making sure their emergency Portkeys – old keys on chains around their necks – were accessible, and set off around the backyard.

Ron looked up at the clear sky and drew in a deep breath. He was strangely nervous about meeting Harry's relatives.

Of course, if they did this right, the muggles would never know they had been there. But if anything had gone wrong, they would be able to use magic. Kingsley, a Senior Auror, had somehow arranged a waiver just for the night.

Ron looked down at himself and shrugged. He had tried to dress nice; Mum and Bill had altered some of Charlie's old muggle clothes, and Ginny had borrowed a skirt and blouse from Hermione – although the shirt was a bit big and the skirt hung a bit loose on her.

Tonks wore muggle clothes more often than robes (it was harder to trip over jeans or get tangled in a tank-top), but had her wand out.

Ron walked around the well-kept garden, glancing at the flower-beds, surprised to see plants that didn't move on their own.

"Wicked..." he muttered.

Ginny didn't say anything. She was paler than normal and gripping her wand. At first, Ron thought it was fear – but the smoldering rage in her eyes made him think it would be best if he and Tonks did the talking.

The backyard was a large L-shape and they had materialized on the side farthest from the back door, at the bottom of the L. As they crept around the corner, they realized they weren't alone.

Ron blinked at what he saw.

He had always considered Crabbe and Goyle to be physically powerful specimens, but Dudley Dursley beat them hands down.

No longer just overweight, Harry's pudgy cousin had transformed much of his bulk into solid slabs of muscle overlying his large bones. He was shadow-boxing, the pale light from the lamp above the back door turning his fists into streaks of color against the dark backdrop. Music played faintly in the background.

Merlin! He's nearly Hagrid's size!

Sweat pouring down his face, Dudley ducked, wove and struck, moving faster than someone with his bulk had a right to. He moved almost as if he were sparring with an inner demon brought to life under the light of the moon.

Ginny was staring at him in shock, and looked over at Ron, whispering. "Is that...Dudley?"

Ron swallowed. "I think so."

"He's good, isn't he?" Tonks whispered from behind them. "I watched he and Harry train all summer, and I can hardly believe how much both of them have changed."

Ron was about to ask Tonks what she meant, but Dudley stopped, lowered his massive fists to his sides, and turned to regard his visitors with a calm they never would have expected. "Is he all right?"

Ron blinked. "What?"

Dudley growled in exasperation, tearing his boxing gloves off with his teeth. "Damn gloves..." He looked back over at Ron. "Potter. Is he all right? He was pretty bad off when he vanished with that silver deer."

"Stag," Ginny corrected calmly. "It was a stag. And yes, Harry's fine." She paused, as if unsure. "He said to tell him you saved his life, and to give you this."

She held out the letter. Dudley took it and thrust it in the pockets of his sweats.

"Knew someone would show up eventually. To get his stuff or to kill Dad. I figured I'd wait out here for you." He shrugged half-heartedly. "It's not as much fun without Harry...you know, he got to be pretty good."

Ginny and Ron looked at each other, having no idea what Dudley was talking about.

“Reckon he did, didn’t he?” Tonks stepped out of the shadows. “You have, too, you know. I heard you did well this morning.” Dudley looked uncomfortable with the praise, but Tonks kept on undaunted. “Trained Aurors, Hit Wizards, and grown men have cowered in fear of those filth. You were offered a chance to run – twice – and you didn’t take it. You even stayed after Harry was gone and fought with our people until it was over.”

Dudley offered a feeble grin. “What, and miss out on a chance to do some real damage?” He turned off his stereo, tucked his gloves under his arm and gestured for them to follow. “You might as well come on in. I’ll help you get his stuff together.”

Ginny nodded. “Thanks. Er, Tonks?”

“We’d best be quick.” The Auror was the first to follow Dudley, “But if it even looks like it’ll get violent, we’re out of here. Got it?”

They both nodded.

Dudley opened the back door, and led them into the dark house. He didn’t bother to flip on any lights, and was obviously trying to move quietly.

“It’s best if we don’t wake them,” he whispered, looking at the three of them as if he expected them to start screaming at the top of their lungs. Which considering his experiences with wizards other than Harry, wasn’t an unreasonable fear.

Ron thrust his hands into his jean pockets and nodded. “With any luck, they’ll never know we were here.”

As they walked past, Ginny stared into the kitchen, realizing it was the same kitchen she had seen in her dream.

But I’ve never been here.

She shivered.

Dudley opened the cupboard under the stairs as quietly as he could.

“He lived in here?” Ginny asked flatly.

Dudley turned away from her in what could have been shame. “Yeah. ‘Til he was eleven, then this summer. Uhh...look, you’ll have to pack him. I can’t fit in there. I can help carry things, though.”

Ginny slipped inside the cupboard and sat down on Harry’s pallet. She realized there were no sheets, and only a single pillow. While Ron was whispering to Tonks, she laid down on it, and breathed in the scent of him.

She ran her hands along the mattress, her fingers stopping at several bloodstains.

Dudley coughed nervously. “I’ll...uh...I’ll be right back, okay? I want to get something for him.” Dudley headed up the stairs as quietly as he could – which wasn’t very.

Ron shook his head. “Mental, that one.”

Tonks just shrugged, but like Ron, was very nervous. They heard footsteps – maybe Dudley’s, maybe not.

“Ginny! Hurry up!” Ron hissed at her, nervously looking around. “I heard something upstairs, and I don’t think it was Dudley.”

Scanning the small area, she reached for the backpack Harry had mentioned earlier when a growling voice came out of the darkness.

“Too right it wasn’t Dudley, boy.” The lights came on, and Vernon Dursley was standing there, fully dressed, a large baseball bat in his beefy hands.

“I knew something was off, today. Something happened at the gym, Potter didn’t come back and Dudley says he doesn’t remember. It was the boy’s...abnormality, wasn’t it?” He snarled, sneering down at Ron. “And now you come into my house intent on stealing my property?”

Ron tried to form an answer, but he couldn't find his voice. However, he didn't need to. Ginny stepped out of the cupboard in front of him.

"No. We came to get Harry's things. He won't be staying here. Ever again."

Vernon glowered at her. "Good riddance. But you won't be taking a bloody thing from my house. If you do..." He brandished the bat.

"We've given the boy food and shelter and clothing, all from the goodness of our hearts!" Petunia spoke from behind Tonks. The Auror whirled around, and saw the woman holding a fireplace poker in a trembling hand. "Now d-don't you dare try any of your nonsense!"

Tonks stepped between Petunia and the two teens. "Put that down, Petunia Dursley. We will be leaving just as soon as we have all of Harry's things."

Ginny ignored Vernon's threats and slung the backpack over her shoulder.

It happened too fast for Ron to react. Vernon struck, and there was the hollow sound of the bat hitting the side of Ginny's head. Her eyes went wide in surprise as she fell to the ground with a muffled cry.

In the next breath Ron's wand was pointed at Vernon. "You. Hit. My. Sister."

Vernon snarled, hefting the bat. "And?"

"Stupefy!" Ron bellowed the spell, putting more power into it than he ever had before.

With an inarticulate cry, Petunia shoved past Tonks and slammed the poker down on Ron's arm. With a cry of pain, his wand fell from numbed fingers, the Stunner blowing a large chunk out of the entryway's stone floor.

Petunia raised the poker to hit Ron again, but Tonks stepped between Petunia and Ron, all clumsiness forgotten.

The Auror parried the iron poker with her wand, her mouth moving in a silent incantation. As the poker and wand touched, there was a flash of white light. The tang of metal filled the air as Petunia dropped the twisted, ruined poker.

Screaming, Harry's aunt threw herself at Tonks, slamming the Auror into the wall.

Vernon lurched forward, swinging the bat at Ron. The redhead tried to leap out of the way, stumbling as he bent to grab his wand. His clumsiness saved him; the blow clipped his shoulder instead of his head, sending him sprawling.

Vernon swung again, but the blow never came close to reaching Ron. Dudley leapt down the last few stairs and caught it in one massive fist. Vernon's eyes widened as Dudley tore the bat from his hands, throwing it aside.

Dudley opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but Vernon tried to pull away, his eyes cold. "Are you siding with them, boy?"

"Give over," Dudley spat. "This is bloody well stupid! Don't you see!?"

Petunia stopped fighting Tonks, her eyes wide in astonishment.

Vernon shook his head. "See what, boy? My own flesh and blood turned traitor for a bunch of freaks he was raised better than to associate with?"

"Don't you see what you made me?!" Dudley bellowed. "What you tried to do to him?"

Ron stared up at Dudley. Harry's cousin was trembling, caught in the throes of more emotion than Ron ever wanted to feel, let alone all of it in a single minute.

"It's useless. Stupid. Wrong." Dudley's great chest was heaving, as if everything he was feeling was trying to explode out at once. Only the

desperation that had driven him to act and the fear of what he was doing kept him in check. "He's not who you said he was. He's someone...I don't bloody well know, but he's someone." Dudley's hand was tightening on his father's wrist, an inexorable vise that Vernon couldn't pull away from no matter how hard he tried.

"What are you talking about, boy? What I've made you?" Vernon shook his head, tugging on his arm. "I've tried to make you a man, boy. Not like him. He is nothing. No one at all. He thinks he's someone and you're stupid enough to believe it!"

Ron wanted to speak, but he was frozen in place. He didn't know what was – or even what could – happen next.

"You're lying. You've always lied to me." Dudley's fingers tightened more, Vernon's face twisting in pain.

"Dudley, no!" Petunia half-gasped, half-sobbed.

Dudley ignored her.

Ron felt like he was a voyeur, watching a moment he never should have been there to witness.

"You let me be weak. You let me be helpless. The only person scared of me was the one person I never should have wanted to hate. He's done more for me in a just a few weeks than you have in years." Dudley's voice was calm now, calmer than it ever had been. They were hearing the voice of Dudley as a man instead of a boy – a man who had just made the hardest choice of his life.

Vernon ground his teeth. "Is this how you want it, boy?"

"No." Dudley shook his head. "Maybe. I don't know. I don't want to be me anymore. I want to something more. Someone better."

Vernon drew himself up, pushing his trapped hand closer to Dudley. "Then go with them, if you think they're better than your own family. Go with them, and never come back."

Dudley blinked and released his father's wrist. "That's it, then? I do something you don't like and you get rid of me?"

"That's it." Vernon smiled coldly. "We will have another child to raise, one who will know her place, and show proper respect and gratitude."

"Gratitude, hell," Ron spat, whipping his wand up. "Stupefy!"

This time, the jet of red light hit Vernon Dursley, and he slumped to the ground.

"That's for hitting my sister."

- 0 -

Harry woke up alone.

He bit back a scream with the simple expedient of biting through his lip. Bright green eyes snapped open to stare into pitch dark. He sat bolt upright, his hand groping for the dangling light bulb that wasn't there. He clawed at empty air, straining –

Light. I need light...

Panic crept up and grabbed at the few threads of rational thought he had; he fought the panic down, struggling with a growing pressure behind his eyes. The room exploded into green light as every candle wick in the room caught with emerald fire that slowly dimmed to the normal yellow-orange.

The pressure – and the panic – were gone. He blinked his eyes against the sudden warm illumination and sank back against the headboard, resisting the urge to close his eyes. He didn't want to fall asleep again; he knew the nightmares would be waiting.

The one he'd just escaped had been different than most of them. More disjointed – he remembered images of Vernon with a wood bat and Petunia with a fireplace poker. Ginny and Ron had both been in the dream – stranger still, Tonks had been there.

He dabbed at the blood running down his chin. At least I was able to light the candles. All too often when he'd woke in the cupboard under the stairs, there hadn't been any light, or he hadn't been able to stop himself from screaming...

I lit the candles. The thought snapped him out his half-awake state. I lit the bloody candles. With magic. He knew what was coming, and this time, not even Dumbledore would be able to get him off.

Everything he had gone through, everything he had endured, everything everyone had done for him would be all for naught because he couldn't control his panic. Because he couldn't deal with a few simple nightmares.

Some prophesied hero I am.

- 0 -

Nymphadora Tonks was over twenty years old, a respected Auror, member of the Order of the Phoenix, and a veteran of more than a dozen battles with Dark Wizards.

Yet she cowered in the face of Molly Weasley.

She was sitting in the kitchen table at the Burrow, flanked by her accomplices – Ginny was glaring hot daggers at her mother, and Ron was staring morosely into his teacup. Hermione sat across the table from them, angry and worried in turns – she had come down as soon as they'd come in, Ron half-carrying Ginny.

Dudley Dursley sat at the end of the table, utterly silent and still.

Molly did what Molly did best. She yelled.

"I cannot believe you allowed this to happen! You, an Auror, no less! An Auror that couldn't handle a pair of muggles! I swear, I don't know how we're going to survive this thing if the children are the only competent ones among us!" She stormed up and down the kitchen – pacing was far too gentle a description – her dressing gown fluttering behind her like a ragged terrycloth cape.

She stopped in mid-stomp and rushed back over to Ginny, only to glare at Tonks some more. "How could you let this happen?"

"Mum, I'll be fine!" Ginny protested, pushing her mother's hands away from her head. "Let it be already! You've healed it at least twice!"

Indignant, Molly put her hands on her hips and moved her glare her youngest child. "You listen to me, young lady! Head injuries are tricky things!"

Ginny never got a chance to answer; she felt a sharp tugging sensation behind her torso – a jolt of fear that wasn't hers.

Every candle in the kitchen suddenly extinguished, and then exploded back to life in a flare of brilliant green light that quickly faded back to a more normal yellow-orange.

Ginny and Tonks leapt to their feet at the same time, just as Dudley fell out of his chair with a rather impressive thud.

"Harry!" Ginny whirled to glare at Hermione, who was standing next to Ron. "You said you wouldn't leave him alone!"

"You were hurt!" Hermione said, looking slightly offended. "What was I supposed to do, just sit up there with him while you were half-conscious!"

"Yes!" Ginny was already heading towards the stairs. "He shouldn't have had to wake up alone!"

"And just what makes you think he's awake?" Hermione moved to stand between Ginny and the stairwell.

"Because I am." Harry staggered down the last stair and smiled weakly. "I'm all right. Just a nightmare. What's this about Ginny being hurt?"

"Harry." Hermione seemed hesitant. "Did you cause the candles to flare like that?"

His smile faded and he nodded. "Yeah. That was me."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Harry, this is bad. This will be your third violation of the Underage restrictions!"

He seemed to barely notice Hermione; he was staring at Ginny. "You're hurt?"

She shrugged, hiding her face behind her hair. "It's nothing. Just a bump, and Mum's overreacting. Your lip..." She moved as if she were going to reach for him.

"I most certainly am not," Molly stated firmly, thrusting a finger into the air, obviously ready to start yelling again, but she paused when Ginny pointed out Harry's bit lip. She sighed, and got a cloth to wipe at Harry's chin. A touch of her wand and a murmured phrase and it healed clean.

"Dad conked her on the nob with a bat," Dudley stated flatly, walking up behind Ginny. "Don't have a ruddy clue where he got the bat, though."

"Dudley?" Harry blinked. "Uncle Vernon hit Ginny?" He was visibly shaken, almost stumbling as he made his way over to Ginny, but there was the hint of fire behind his green eyes.

She caught him by his arms, shocked at how feverish his bare skin felt against her palms. "Really, I'm fine. Are you all right?"

Harry brushed her hair back over her ear, his fingertips grazing where Vernon had hit her. "I'm fine. Are you sure?"

Hermione frowned. How had Harry known where she'd been hit when no one had told him?

"I'm sure..." She whispered. "I'm worried about you."

"I wish you hadn't gone there." Harry took a step back, hanging his head to hide the guilt in his eyes. One of his friends had been hurt because of him. "I told you it wasn't safe for you there."

Ginny put her hand under his chin and gently forced his head up until she could look him in the eyes. She took a minuscule step forward, closing the small distance between them; strands of her hair tickled his chest. "I can take care of myself, Harry Potter, as I would have told you if you hadn't sent me away."

"He's right. It wasn't a good idea for all three of you to come," Dudley said. "Dad hates Harry and what Harry is." He paused. "I don't, anymore. But Dad's been violent about it lately. He knocked you out, Red. He and Mum had Tonks over there pinned down." He gestured at the dejected-looking Auror with his half-empty teacup. "Ron zapping him is all that saved you from worse."

Harry paled, and gripped Ginny's hand tighter – when did I start holding her hand?

Hermione looked at Ron. "You did magic too? Are you trying to get expelled?"

"He hit my sister!" Ron shot back. "Besides, Kingsley Shacklebolt said it'd be okay."

Hermione just sighed and put her hand on Ron's shoulder. "Ron..."

Harry and Ginny grinned at each other at the fondness in Hermione's voice.

Molly let out a great huff. "All of you come back and sit down and I'll fix a spot of tea and maybe a bit of something to eat. If nothing else, I can at least make sure you're well fed!"

Everyone except Harry and Ginny filed back into the kitchen.

Ginny looked up at Harry – she only came up to his chin. "Is this where you try to send me away again? Because I got hurt trying to help you?"

He shook his head. "Yes. No. I don't know. I don't want you or anyone else hurt because of me. I just can't..." He stopped in mid-sentence and looked very woozy. "Ginny...I sent you away in a dream."

"I thought that was my dream..." Ginny was as shaken as Harry looked.

"Hey, are you two coming?" Ron yelled from the kitchen.

"Be right there!" Ginny yelled back, not taking her eyes away from Harry's. "Now what?"

She left so many questions unspoken – questions they were both afraid to voice.

He sighed. "I don't know. I don't want to tell anyone else until we can talk about it."

"I'm good with that." Ginny tried to smile, but didn't quite succeed. "We should go, before Mum comes after us."

"Yeah." Harry let her lead him by the hand into the kitchen. They joined everyone else at the table, accepting cups of tea from Molly. It didn't take long to tell the whole story of the night's errand, including Dudley's role in stopping Vernon.

"Looks like that's two I owe you, big D." Harry forced a smile. "You're getting the hang of being one of the good guys."

Dudley grinned. "Yeah, well being a bad guy gets boring after awhile. Though what was that bit with the candles?"

Hermione took this as her cue. "Accidental magic. Most magic is focused through our wands, the magical 'core' acting as a conduit for the energy wizards and witches channel. Spells – wand movements and spoken words – are just tools to help us put our minds in the right place to channel that energy.

“Accidental magic occurs in times of great stress and emotion, usually because the emotion is intense enough to force our minds into the places and forms where we can use magic. Most accidental magic is uncontrolled and purely instinctual and usually only occurs when a witch or wizard is first coming into their powers, mainly because their powers are growing faster than their instinctual control can keep up, and usually stops happening after conscious control is learned.” She frowned. “Harry seems to be the exception to that rule.”

Dudley chuckled. “Potter’s been doing weird stuff his entire life. All the time. Once or twice a week, even. It got a bit better since he started going to that school of his, but random stuff keeps happening.”

Hermione, for once, was speechless. She was beginning to suspect what the glow had been around Harry earlier that night.

Molly set out a tray of biscuits. “Nothing to worry about, then. The Ministry can’t always detect accidental magic. The Sensing Spells are keyed to specific spells – patterns of energy, I suppose Hermione might call them. Most of the time, they can’t tell the difference between accidental or wandless magic and an adult casting a spell in a wizarding house. With all the magic around here, I doubt it made their detectors even twitch. And accidental magic only stops when the wizard has reached their full power. That Harry still does just proves us what we already knew – he is an exceptional and powerful wizard.”

Harry shivered, despite the warmth of the tea. Does that mean my magic is still growing? The thought was a frightening one, and he didn’t like the implications at all.

“...he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...”

Could his mysterious power be something as simple as just having more magic than Voldemort? Or anyone else, for that matter? It didn’t seem to make sense. One of the many things Gracie had taught him was that power and skill weren’t the same thing. Power without skill was useless, but skill without power could still be devastating.

Damn, but I hope Gracie's okay. He had left her behind when he'd somehow teleported himself away from the gym. Dumbledore had said she was fine, but Harry wasn't sure how much of that he could believe. Dumbledore had said Sirius had been fine, trapped in Grimmauld Place. But he hadn't been fine, had he? He was going crazy, crazy enough to come and rescue me when I was stupid enough to fall for Voldemort's trick.

His mind felt tight, cluttered with too many thoughts he couldn't contain and couldn't process – and he hurt. He ached all over.

"So what would it have meant if Potter'd got another of those warnings?" Dudley asked as Molly bustled around the kitchen.

"His name is Harry," Ron said quietly. "Not 'Potter'."

"Ron," Harry held up his free hand, "it's fine. He can call me whatever he wants. My name's Potter, too."

Ron looked like he was about to argue, but Hermione cut in. "A third warning would have meant the Ministry could have snapped his wand and incarcerated him as a danger to our world. Once is considered accidental. Twice is generally a fine, a stern warning and some kind of community service – and a special class on when to use and not to use magic." She looked like she'd bit something sour. "Harry was treated as if his second offense was his third, so there's no telling what the Ministry would do if he broke the rules a third time."

Harry shrugged. "I already did. This morning. I cast the Patronus Charm."

"Considering how many Death Eaters got captured today and considering there was an attack on the Burrow, I don't think even Fudge could claim it wasn't self-defense," Ron said, accepting a surprisingly large plate of bacon sandwiches from his mother, grinning as Dudley eyed the plate with unashamed hunger. "They taste better than they smell, trust me on that!"

"Oh, really, Ron!" Hermione huffed. "Dumbledore already said the Death Eaters had masked all the spells that were cast!"

Ron shrugged, biting into a sandwich. "Oh yeah. Forgot."

Hermione looked to Harry, but he was lost in thought.

Fudge can still get me. Harry felt even more thoughts crowding into his head. He'd just claim I made the whole thing up and the Order overreacted.

It bothered him that he was afraid of Cornelius Fudge. The man was a bumbling bureaucrat who was more interested in his own political power and position than in the fate of the wizarding world.

I'm scared of a coward.

He barely noticed Ginny putting sandwiches on the plate in front of him. He really wasn't aware when he started nibbling on one.

Molly picked up the teapot and was making the rounds, refilling mugs. Harry found himself staring into the burner flame, trying to feed his emotions back into it, letting the fire devour the pain. But instead of the comfort of the void, he found an aching emptiness. Yet, it was enough to calm his mind, to let the thoughts skitter away like drops of water on a hot griddle.

He was acutely aware of the feel of Ginny's hand in his; of her skin pressed against his; the scent of her next to him, like cinnamon and honeysuckle warmed by sunlight. He was almost painfully aware of how close she sat, of how worried she was. He could even tell her head was still hurting her a bit, from the way her brow was slightly furrowed...

He rubbed his head with his free hand, trying to clear it. Pain potion residue. I really hate those things. Better to hurt than to not be able to think.

Conversation continued without him. Ron was talking to Dudley. "So what are you gonna do, Dudley? I mean, you're welcome here and all that, but I dunno how well you'd like it."

Dudley washed a large bite of sandwich down with an equally large swallow of tea. "Your Mum's already said I can stay as long as I need, but I think I'm gonna see if I can stay with my boxing coach." The large boy slumped. "If he's even still my coach. Dad will likely cut off the money."

From behind the void, Harry tried to concentrate. He took a swallow of tea. "I can pay Duncan."

Dudley laughed. "How's that, Potter? Got a gold mine hidden somewhere?"

Ron and Ginny snickered.

"My parents left me some money. More than enough for me. It was me who messed things up for you, so it'll be me to fix it." Harry shrugged, eating with one hand, slowly becoming aware of how hungry he was.

"Duncan costs a lot." Dudley was looking very uncomfortable.

"I can cover it," Harry said absently, smiling at Ginny when she handed him another sandwich.

Dudley seemed unsure what to say, so he changed the subject. "You look like hell, Potter, but you're putting away more food than I am."

"Magical healing takes a lot of energy that has to be replaced." Hermione said, "and Harry required more than a little healing. He'll probably be weak and tired for several days."

"Great," Harry muttered. How was he going to practice if he was too weak to walk? How am I going to practice with everyone watching?

"Speaking of Harry's health..." Ron sounded thoughtful. "Dudley, is there any chance you can stay here and commute to London every day?"

"Ron?" Ginny asked.

“Probably. I bet you have some trick for that...but why would you want me here?” Dudley asked, bewildered.

“Besides you saving my best mate and my sister?” Ron asked. “You’re a bloke I can count to on have my back if something else bad goes down, and you’re Harry’s family. You being here means the blood protections would work.”

To say Harry was surprised was an understatement; Ron wasn’t known for his ability to forgive and forget – and he wasn’t known for his ability to come up with stuff everyone else missed.

“Well, we could certainly ask Dumbledore,” Molly mused, “but it’s certainly do-able.”

“Blood protections?” Dudley asked, scratching his head in a way that reminded Harry of a gorilla he’d once seen at the zoo.

I have to admit...I’d like Dudley to be here. At least I’d have a sparring partner. And maybe he can contact Gracie for me.

Hermione launched into a complicated explanation of the blood wards while Molly went to contact Dumbledore. Dudley looked more and more confused until Ron laughed and cut Hermione off.

“It’s really like this. Harry lives with someone he’s related to and who doesn’t want him dead for a month near his birthday, and the big bad guy trying to kill him can’t.”

Dudley nodded. “Oh. I guess I can stay, then.”

Hermione glared. “But that’s what I said!”

Harry’s cousin grinned. “I’m big and dumb. My most endearing qualities. You use the big words, I get lost.”

Harry almost choked hearing Dudley be self-deprecating. Ginny looked at him worriedly, but Harry shook his head at her.

A moment later, Molly bustled back in. “Well, then, it’s all settled. Dumbledore agrees with Ron. Dudley, you are welcome to stay here if you want – and we would be very appreciative of it. The Order of the Phoenix will be happy to pay your coach anything he needs if you will, in fact.”

Dudley gaped, but quickly pulled himself together. After a long moment, he shook his head.

“No worries. I’ll stay and we can figure out what Duncan needs later. I didn’t save Potter’s life just for someone dumber and uglier than me to kill him.” His humor was forced. “If anyone’s gonna off the runt, it should be family.”

Molly frowned a bit. “Right, then. We’ll just get you boys into your rooms. Harry, I’m giving you Percy’s old room, just under Ron and down the hall from Ginny. Dudley, you’re across from Ron, in Fred and George’s old room. Bill has his old room, and Fleur and Charlie are sharing Charlie’s old room. I’m sure we can find you some clothes, if we need.”

Dudley shrugged. “Whatever works. I brought everything I need when we left. Dad was pretty sure he wanted me out.”

Molly surprised everyone by giving Dudley a hug, Dudley most of all.

That might be the first real hug he’s ever had.

“You are most welcome here, Dudley Dursley.” Molly took him by the elbow. “It’s getting rather late, and it’s high time you all were in bed. Especially you, Harry Potter. Ginny, get Harry settled in, will you? Ron, could you...?”

Ron grinned. “Yeah, I’ll clean up, Mum. And I’ll drag Harry’s trunk up to him when I’m done.”

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Ginny tried to follow Harry upstairs, but Hermione grabbed her arm.

“Ginny...” Hermione looked surprisingly unsure of herself, but still determined.

Ginny just waited. Lately, anytime anyone looked unsure around her, they wanted to talk about Harry. Why couldn’t people just leave her alone and let her deal with her feelings for Harry?

“I think you should let Ron help Harry get settled in. You and I can clean up.”

She narrowed her eyes at Hermione. “Why?”

“Because I don’t think you being alone with Harry is a very good idea. I think you both need some space right now.” Hermione no longer looked unsure of herself; now she looked positively smug. “I think you’re unhealthily obsessed with him, and I think he’s emotionally vulnerable. I know it feels like he’s responding to you the way you want him to, but I don’t think he is. I think he’s latching on because he’s desperate for comfort.”

Ginny sucked in a deep breath and silently counted to ten. “And so why would I be a bad person to provide comfort? Because I’m not a member of the little Dream Team you, Ron and Harry have formed?” She was starting to get angry. How was she supposed to have even a chance of friendship, let alone anything romantic, with Harry if everyone kept getting between the two of them? “Just because he’s responding to someone besides you and Ron you have to get between them?”

Like you did Harry and Cho?

“No.” Hermione shook her head. “You’re both my friends. Harry’s in no condition to figure out what he wants emotionally right now, and I don’t want to see either of you get hurt. Ginny, you’ve been pining after him as long as I’ve known you, to the point where it’s interfered with your relationships with other boys. Now, just when it seems like you’re breaking free of that, you gravitate back to Harry like a compass needle to magnetic north. That isn’t healthy.”

“You are obliquely referencing this supposed bond between me and Harry, then?” Ginny spoke slowly, as if each word tasted bitter. “This is a different world than you grew up in, Hermione. Maybe I like this bond. Maybe it won’t bother Harry like it bothers you. Or maybe this bond has nothing to do with how I feel or how he may feel.” She chose her words carefully – she had to believe that Hermione was acting out of concern. She didn’t want to fight or argue. She just wanted the right to be Harry’s friend and have a chance to become something more. “Harry told me earlier that he didn’t promise me anything. That he didn’t know how he feels. And I believe him. But I’ve been there for him all summer and I’m going to be there for him now, in ways that you and Ron can’t or won’t be there for him.”

Hermione’s lips were pressed into a thin line. “I think you’re wrong. I don’t have any right to stop you, but I still think you’re wrong.”

“That’s right. You don’t have a right to stop me. I don’t know if you’re right or not, Hermione. I’ll even promise to think about it and talk about it with Harry. But I want to be his friend.”

Hermione shook her head. “Friendship with Harry isn’t simple or easy, Ginny. And I imagine being more to him is even harder, because he’s never been taught how to be in a relationship. You’ve had your parents as examples, I’ve had mine. We’ve even had stories and tales and books where heroes and heroines fall in love, conquer evil, and live happily ever after. Harry hasn’t. You can’t expect him to know how you’re going to feel, or what will and won’t hurt you. He won’t know when to buy you flowers or when to say he’s sorry, or even when he’s being a bad friend. He won’t know, because no one’s taught him. If you go into this thinking he’s easy to get along with or the moments between danger-filled ‘adventures’ are going to be full of fun and laughter and maybe romance, then you need to change those expectations.”

Ginny calmed down. Hermione really was just worried and trying to give the best advice she could, even if the advice wasn’t particularly welcome.

“I know all of that. But what about what he is? He’s kind and gentle and noble. He tries not to hurt anyone and tries to always be polite

and respectful. Somehow, despite not having all of those things, he's turned out to be a good person, well worth friendship and patience and maybe even a bit of love. In fact, I think it's love he's been lacking in his life. Imagine never having someone hold your hand to cross the street, or kiss your scraped knee, or let you crawl into the bed with them to protect you from thunderstorms and nightmares?"

Hermione's face grew slightly harder. "I never had those things, Ginny, and I turned out okay."

Ginny held out her hand. "Oh, Hermione..."

"No. It's nothing like that. I grew up differently, but no less loved. My father sat next to my bed and held my hand, telling me what caused nightmares or thunderstorms and why I was safe. That it was okay to be scared. My mother cleaned out my scrapes and told me I was okay, but she was too formal to 'kiss the hurt away' – but she was always the first one to be there for me when I needed her."

The redhead sighed. "Look, Hermione, Harry needs more than a little of that kind of support. Someone to hold his hand or give him a hug, or just sit there and play with his hair while he broods. I can give that, friend or girlfriend. Can you? And do you think I'm wrong? I've seen you and Ron. You're not as demonstrative as I am...but that kind of support is there."

Hermione had the grace to blush. She vividly recalled curling up next to Ron on the Weasley's couch when she first got to the Burrow, and other times she'd just sat beside him or leaned up against him.

"No, I don't think you're wrong. And though I don't think I can do that for Harry, I'm still not sure you should."

Ginny shrugged. "No one else will. I'm going to be there for him until he tells me to be somewhere else. I'll deal with what happens after it happens." She paused, and her eyes glistened. "He might be killed tomorrow or next week. Or I might die going with him on some crazy mission. I'd like to think if that happened, I had been there for him, with him at least that much instead of having left him alone." She whirled and ran off.

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Harry looked around his new room while he waited for Ginny, surprised to see the walls painted a muted blue-gray; the bed was black wood, simple in form and function, though it looked far more comfortable than his cot.

The room still looked like it belonged to Percy. Meticulously neat, dozens of awards framed and hung on the walls, including his old Prefect badge, his Head Boy badge, his OWL and NEWT results, and his formal job offer from the Ministry.

So is this going to be home now? Is this my place? He could never go back to the Dursleys and he couldn't stay at Hogwarts...

Welcome home, Harry Potter.

Did that mean Dudley was now a permanent guest of the Weasleys, too?

He shook his head. His thoughts were sluggish, chaotic; he needed to clear his mind, and think things through, or he was never getting back to sleep.

And he was still exhausted. He felt achingly empty, as if something had drained every bit of energy out of him.

Clearing a spot in the middle of the floor, he set one candle down, and extinguished the rest. He sat cross-legged in front of the candle, his hands palm up on his knees.

Staring into the flame, he focused on his breathing. Slow – in and out.

Just like he had in the kitchen, he fed his thoughts to the flame; then his emotions. He fed the flame until there was nothing left in his mind but the emptiness. He was in the center of the emptiness; in the center of himself.

Gracie's voice whispered in his mind. 'Meditation. From the Greek 'media tarse' – to be in the center. Meditation is finding the center and existing there.'

He wondered what it meant that his center was empty.

The emptiness still ached, still hurt, but not as much.

Thoughts floated across the emptiness, and he grabbed them, examining them.

The Death Eaters followed me to the Burrow. The thought came with fear. As long as I am here, the Weasleys are in danger.

But weren't they already? They'd already decided to fight Voldemort – twice. They were already a target. Lucius Malfoy and his family hated the Weasleys. Harry's presence increased the threat to them, but only slightly.

Still, he wasn't sure how he'd managed to travel from McAllister's to the Burrow – maybe he had brought the Death Eaters with him, and Voldemort didn't know where he was.

Even if I weren't here, they'd be in danger because of me. Voldemort hurts them, he hurts me.

He couldn't undo what had been done.

Even if you'd known befriending you meant danger for others, you couldn't have gone through Hogwarts alone. Without Hermione and Ron, Voldemort would have come back our first year. Or our second. We kept him from coming back for three years.

There was still the Prophecy to consider, but the Prophecy didn't say he couldn't have help; only that he and he alone had the power to end things.

He had been wrong. He had been wrong to think he could do this without his friends; wrong to be angry at them last year.

But where had the anger come from? He felt almost as if he had been two people. One was always angry, and the other was the one who had been vibrantly alive while teaching the DA and terrified when Hermione had been struck with the Slashing Curse.

How much does this connection with Voldemort affect me? How much of my anger was his?

Connections. Links.

Ginny.

She'd been one of the first put into danger because Voldemort wanted him dead; her first year had been spent under Voldemort's power. Then, years later, she'd insisted on coming with him to rescue Sirius. She's fought off the Inquisitorial Squad and faced down Umbridge. She'd been hurt, but hadn't let that stop her.

She understood what it was like to face Voldemort.

She has a right to fight against him. Even if she can't face him in the end, she has a right to fight.

Even so, Ginny confused him. Getting to know her through letters over the summer had made sense. She was his best friend's sister; she'd faced Voldemort with him and fought Death Eaters beside him. But the way he'd reacted to her after he'd woke up didn't make sense. He'd enjoyed her touch...enjoyed her presence; she was like a balm, easing raw places he didn't know he had.

He liked it and had no idea what it meant.

Her being in his dreams made sense; they were both connected to Voldemort. They were connected to each other because of what had happened her first year. Strong, uncontrolled emotion was a weakness – and his mental defenses had been at their weakest ebb ever when he'd come home from Hogwarts, while her emotions had been at their strongest. For him, and because of what had happened.

What is she to me? What can I let her be to me? What do I want her to be to me?

The dream they'd shared had been the first sign his mind had been too open. Gracie's teaching had helped with that, some, but – was it enough?

His mind had been exposed to intensive battering the past year, from both Voldemort and Snape. Harry remembered Voldemort's insinuations from his first vision. The Dark Lord's words had mirrored the Headmaster's.

'I have reason to trust Severus Snape.' How many times had Dumbledore said that to him?

I have to trust Dumbledore. He's the only one who can teach me what I need to know. What I need to do.

If Dumbledore trusts Snape, then I will trust Snape. Within reason.

Blind faith was dangerous. Harry knew that; it was blind faith in what he had seen that had led to Sirius' death.

And Dumbledore could be wrong. Harry had learned that the hard way.

So can I. I have to trust him. I have to trust them. Not the Order, but my friends. They've been fighting beside me for too long.

No more. He would not be angry with them.

'Anger is defeated self.'

Gracie must have said those words a thousand times in those few weeks, as if she had known what demons he was facing.

'Action and reaction. A logical and sequential flow of motion. One into the next.'

Everything around him was like that; he could see it. Connections and patterns, flowing together in seamless unity. Each leading to the next, branching into a thousand more. The tiny things in his life building, bringing him, moment by moment, to each inevitable confrontation.

Tom Riddle doesn't understand. He wants to change the world, instead of living in it, working with the flow. What is it he said? 'There is no such thing as good and evil. Only power, and those too weak to seek it.'

Harry Potter suddenly knew better. There was good, and there was evil. It was what lay in between that really mattered.

Choice. Dumbledore told me, after the Chamber. It is our choices that make us who and what we are.

Free will was the vast gulf between good and evil. Choices brought a person closer to one or the other. Each decision created change.

Harry stared at the single flame of the candle, the fire drawing his eyes. Inside the emptiness, he saw the fire.

Something had to change.

He had to choose differently, this time. Or he would lose everything.

If I lose everything, then the entire world loses everything. If I choose wrong, the entire world loses everything.

He felt the burden of the Prophecy smothering him, the impossible realization that the fate of the world rested in his hands.

...and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives...

He had to kill – to take a life. To end a life.

His training came back to him again. One action leading into one reaction...an endless flow. Never ending motion; action and reaction time and again together becoming interaction.

It had to start somewhere, right? One thing leading to another.

There was only one action he had to take. He had to kill the thing Tom Riddle had become.

To fight him, I have to learn more than I know.

The thoughts skittered across the emptiness like raindrops on a window, not holding their grip for very long at all.

Gracie's words, again. "A warrior is more than a fighter. More than a cause, more than passion. A warrior is someone who chooses when and how and why to fight."

It was a slow, steady realization. A slow, steady thought.

I want to be a warrior.

I want to make a difference.

He couldn't do that working at the Ministry. He couldn't do it under Fudge's thumb. He couldn't be an Auror.

He had to find another path.

He breathed in and out and he fed the flame, and his mind stayed empty.

Distantly, he heard the door open and close. A soft sound, the creak of hinges and the click of the door shutting.

Who...?

Harry whirled to his feet, his wand appearing in his hand...and he stopped, staring into a pair of startled cinnamon eyes framed by red hair.

"Ginny..." He breathed a sigh of relief and dropped his wand.

“Good reflexes,” she said dryly.

“Thanks.” He grinned sheepishly and sat back down on the floor, still facing the flame. He rested his wand in his lap. Ginny leaned against the bed and pulled her knees up to her chest. “Guess I’m a little jumpy right now.”

“What are you doing?”

Harry shrugged, a little sheepishly. “Meditation. It helps with the Occlumency, I think.”

Ginny smiled wanly. “I’ve heard that it can...I just never got around to learning it. Where did you learn it anyway?”

“Gracie.” He spoke softly, as if he were still lost in thought. “Do you want to light more candles?”

“No, no...this is fine.” Ginny shook her head, the light from the candle reflecting off her hair.

Harry looked up, his green eyes bright. “What did you mean when you said you’d never got around to learning meditation?”

It was Ginny’s turn to look sheepish. “Bill taught me Occlumency the summer after my first year, while we were on vacation in Egypt.”

There was a flicker of something that might have been anger in his eyes. “Snape was teaching me last year.”

Ginny shook her head, wanting to move closer to him, but for some reason, she was afraid to. “I didn’t know until the end of the year,” she whispered, “or I would have said something.”

His eyes softened. His smile grew warm. “Maybe you and Bill can help me this summer.”

“I’d like that.” She breathed out a sigh of relief. “Have you been able to do it? To clear your mind?”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “But I think I’ve got a good start.” He fiddled with his wand. “Ginny, I...”

“Shh.” She scooted closer to him, and held out her arms, inviting him to come closer to her. “Let me talk first.”

He hesitated, and looked at her for a long moment, staring at her outstretched arms with an expression that reminded her of a wild animal – afraid, unsure, but – wanting.

“Harry, it’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.”

I just want to hold you. She almost spoke the thought aloud, but held her tongue at the last second.

She realized there was some truth in what Hermione had said earlier. Harry had reacted to her the way he had partially because he had been in shock. As everything he’d been through the last six weeks finally set in, it was going to be harder for her to connect with him. He was hurt and scared and his instinct was to draw away from people.

But for the moment, he seemed willing to try, at least with her. Maybe there was some truth in what she had told Hermione, too.

He came closer and she slid her arms around his chest, feeling the smooth warmth of his skin. He leaned back and she pressed her cheek into his shoulder, breathing in the scent of him.

“Is this okay?” she whispered, a bit of her own fear creeping into his voice.

“I-I don’t...” He was still nervous and afraid; he wasn’t sure how to react or what he was feeling.

She let go and he sat cross legged next to her, his hands resting on his knees, both of them staring ahead at the flame.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered back to her.

“No.” She put her hand over his. “Don’t be. I don’t know what I can or can’t do...and,” she swallowed hard, “someone has to teach you touching can be a good thing.”

He changed the subject. “You were going to talk first.”

She nodded. “The dream. Our dream. I think I know why it was shared.” He just nodded and she continued. “My first year, you saved my life. There’s a wizarding bond formed when that happens...but I think because we both have a connection to Tom it changed the nature of the connection. Made it deeper or different, somehow.”

He was silent in a way she’d never seen; he seemed to have wrapped silence around himself and sunk deep into it. Her palms were sweaty and she was more nervous than she wanted to be.

“Hermione or Dumbledore could probably explain it better maybe make it make more sense...”

He turned and put a finger to her lips, and smiled. “I’d figured some of that out already. That’s not why I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“It’s not?” she asked weakly. Her voice squeaked a little and she wanted to crawl under the bed from embarrassment.

“No. I wanted us to talk about it because we’re going to have to tell Ron and Hermione and probably Dumbledore. Maybe your Mum and Dad. That’s a lot of people to hear about what was private between us.”

Ginny nodded morosely. “I know.” She dreaded having to tell them about the dream, about wanting the dream.

He sent me away.

“They’ll be upset with me, I think,” Ginny said. “I wanted to dream of you...sometimes I do, right after Hogwarts. Sometimes the dreams are like that one...only you don’t know I’m there.”

He smiled wanly. "Snape's 'teaching' and Voldemort's intrusions have made me more aware of my own mind than I thought I would ever be."

She forced a smile in return, but looked away. "At least no one will be mad at you this time. You sent me away."

Harry might have heard the catch in her voice, or seen the expression in her eyes.

"Ginny." Something in his voice made her look at him. "I didn't send you away because I didn't want you there. I sent you away because I didn't want you hurt."

"You wanted me there?" She wasn't sure she had heard him right.

"Yes, I did. I hate it there." His eyes grew distant. "I want my friends with me, not away from me."

Her hand reached up for his face, touching his cheek, before she could think better of it. He flinched, she withdrew her hand, and he saw something in her eyes. "What is it?"

"Harry...I like whatever this is between us. It's no secret how I feel about you. But what if it's just the bond...what if it's just you being hurt and needing so bad..." She blinked away tears, angry at herself that she was crying again.

"No." His voice was hoarse, raspy. "No. Magic will not take this away from me too." He grabbed both of her hands in his. "Ginny, listen to me. Believe me. Please."

She nodded, eyes wide.

"I don't know what I'm feeling. I like what's between us too. I don't understand it or know where it came from but don't take it away from me because you're afraid of something that may or may not be there." It was hard for him to be this open with anyone, but he knew better than she did what was coming for the both of them – the

whispers, the rumors, the scrutiny, the questions and the total invasion of privacy.

Then he stopped, and dropped her hands, his eyes going as wide as hers. I can't ask this of her...

"Unless you think what you're feeling is just the bond. Then...do what you need, what you want to do."

She saw he was as scared as she was – maybe more so, and scooted closer to him, so she was practically in his lap. "I want to give this, whatever this is, a chance. I don't think it's just the bond. I don't think it's 'just' anything. But everyone else..."

"Can stay out of it. We'll tell them about the dreams. About the bond. But that's all they get." Even as he said it, he realized that this was one of the few things in life that made him feel, quite simply, good.

Hesitantly, unsure about what he was doing, he brought his arms up around her. "The bond can go both ways, because you saved my life back then, too."

She let herself be pulled against him, amazed that he was holding her, was reaching out for her. "What do you mean?"

"You resisted when he wanted you to kill me, didn't you? That's why he had to lure me down to the chamber before he'd finished killing you."

She nodded weakly, closing her eyes. "It was the one thing I didn't let him make me do."

"You gave me the chance I needed to save you, then."

"Maybe." She hid her face from him. "But you're the one who fought the Basilisk. You're the one who killed him."

"Not yet," he whispered so quietly she could barely hear him. "Not yet."

End Chapter

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Finding Gracie

To say Drake Stevens had no idea what to expect working with Mad-Eye Moody would be an understatement. It was, if nothing else, educational.

As soon as they left the gym, Moody cast a rapid-fire series of ‘notice-me-not’ and conversation muffling charms, scanned for listening and tracking spells or talismans and other forms of scrying, and then proceeded to wander about Little Whinging for two hours.

Neither man said anything as they wandered, but both were attentive and observant, but what they were looking for was different.

Drake was looking around the sleepy little town where the Boy Who Lived had grown up, trying to see what it would tell him about the boy he had to find and Moody was watching Drake. Though aware of the scrutiny, the Hit Wizard tried to ignore it.

After two hours had passed and neither of them had shown signs of being poly-juiced or being followed by Death Eaters or reporters, Mad-Eye grunted. “Good. Let’s get out of sight and report in. Undersecretary Weasley is waiting. We’ll Apparate to the MLE office.”

Drake blinked. They were going to report to the Minister’s Undersecretary? The closest he’d ever been to that level of brass were the mid-level dignitaries he’d met abroad.

“Right then,” he said, his voice a bit higher pitched than he would later admit.

They ducked into a side street and Apparated, re-appearing at the Apparition point in the MLE office. Moody’s apparition was nearly silent; Drake’s was not.

He’s the best for a reason, the Hit Wizard admitted to himself.

To Drake's chagrin, Moody had noticed too. "Too loud. Slow down your magic. Re-appear slower. Better control, less noise."

Drake just nodded. How in the hell am I supposed to slow my magic down?

Not that his noise mattered. There were always two guards watching the apparition point. Moody ignored them, but Drake nodded politely to both.

They ignored him.

Drake swallowed a sigh and followed Moody to the Undersecretary's office. Or so he thought.

Instead of a Ministry office, he followed Moody into a large, open room filled with cluttered desks, map tables, wall charts, harried people and what looked to be absolute chaos.

No one was still. Paper airplanes whizzed through air filled with the tidal waves of sound that can only come from a hundred simultaneous conversations. Voices droned over the sounds of quills scratching, owls hooting and Ministry house elves popping everywhere with drinks, supplies and the occasional squeaked message. Ministry staff rushed about to and fro, dodging each other, the airplanes and the elves with varying levels of success. Sweat, stale coffee and ink scented the air with the aroma of a bureaucratic battlefield.

In the center of it all was an unassuming redhead dressed in better-than-average maroon robes. Impeccably groomed, poised, and surprisingly calm, he orchestrated the chaos with a firm hand that showed he knew exactly what was going on. He was talking to a black-haired man wearing bright white robes, occasionally pausing to issue an instruction or answer a question.

Moody made a beeline for the redhead and everyone got out of his way – man, elf and airplane alike. Drake followed in his wake, but had to do more than his fair share of dodging, as he wasn't shown the same courtesy.

As they approached, the white-robed man nodded once to the Undersecretary and strode off purposefully. The Undersecretary watched him leave before turning to Moody, a polite but sincere smile on his youthful face. "Auror Moody, you're back sooner than I expected. You have something for me?"

"Lockhart's a stupid tosser and tainted the crime scene. I can't trace Potter or the muggle from there." Moody pitched his voice to carry only to the redhead and Drake, but a few people nearby slowed to eavesdrop.

The Undersecretary wasn't impressed with the eavesdroppers. He shot them a sharp glance, and they all found an urgent elsewhere to be.

"You can trace the muggle, then?" The Undersecretary asked, plucking an airplane out of the air and unfolding it.

Drake frowned. Why wasn't the Undersecretary more worried about Harry Potter?

"Aye, but I'll have to do it the hard way. I've re-assigned Stevens over there from Squad Four to me." Moody grinned, pointing at Drake. "That way one of your people is on hand to make sure I behave."

The redhead shrugged. "No need. I know you won't betray oath to the Ministry, no matter where your loyalties may mistakenly lie. Take him if you want him, but I trust you to do your job." He ignored Moody's scowl and turned to Drake. "Drake Stevens, is it? I've read your file. You've done good work in the past and I know you'll do just as well now. I'm Percy Weasley, Junior Undersecretary to the Ministry of Magic and this," he gestured to the room with his free hand, "is our Command Center for dealing with the war."

He offered his hand to Drake, who shook it. "Thank you, Mister Undersecretary."

“You’re welcome. What’s your report?” He didn’t wait for Drake to answer before producing a quill from his sleeve and jotting an answer on the note. He refolded it and threw it back across the room.

“We arrived to find the Death Eaters subdued and bound. Potter and McAllister were already gone and Auror Shacklebolt was on scene. He turned over scene authority to Auror Lockhart and left. There are wards around the scene we can’t take down – anti-apparition and magic detection buffers, at the least. We interrogated the Death Eaters and found a possible origination for the strike. Auror Lockhart sent Squad Six to investigate. We have no word from them.”

“They’re dead, then,” Moody said sharply. “A single squad sent to a Death Eater base wouldn’t survive to report back in.”

Percy frowned. “I have to agree with Auror Moody. Auror Lockhart should have reported and waited for instructions. Please continue, Hit Wizard.”

Drake swallowed hard. “Yes sir. The Death Eaters and Auror Shacklebolt reported Potter vanished after casting a Patronus Charm. Apparently, his corporeal Patronus took him away in some kind of silver light. Our best theory is accidental magic – some kind of forced Apparition through the wards. Aurors Shacklebolt and Lockhart ruled it self-defense.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Percy said as if the words tasted bitter. “I imagine he would transport himself somewhere he felt safe. He couldn’t get to Hogwarts. Auror Moody, have you had any word from your ‘contacts’ about Potter’s whereabouts?”

“None,” the Auror admitted grudgingly. “I haven’t been in touch with any of them. I’d have heard word if Potter were dead or missing, though.”

“Don’t bother, then. I doubt you could tell me where he is, anyway,” Percy waved off Moody. “I’ll speak to my own contacts about it.” He sighed in frustration. “Damn.”

“Sir?” Moody asked.

"You know and I know Potter's safe wherever it is your people have him, Auror, but that's not really good enough. I'll have to assign people to look for him until I can get a confirmed location." He shook his head. "That's my problem. You concentrate on finding McAllister and once you know what she saw, Obliviate her."

Drake coughed. "With all due respect, sir, I doubt it will be that easy. She killed five of the Death Eaters. Without magic."

Percy actually looked surprised. "A muggle – an old woman – killed five Death Eaters?"

"That's what the evidence points to," Drake said.

Percy looked back at Moody. "What's your next move, then?"

"Let her go, at least for awhile. The Death Eaters will be after her to finish the job. They attack her, we'll have more of them, possibly higher ranking than the peons we caught this morning."

The Undersecretary frowned again. "I'm not sure that's necessary."

Moody laughed harshly. "They'll come after her whether or not we Obliviate her. I say we let her lead us to more of them."

Still frowning, Percy sighed. "No. She's not to be used as bait. Instead, I want you to track her, find out what her relationship with Potter is, and then Obliviate her."

Moody and Percy met eyes and neither said anything for a long moment as the tension built.

Drake felt sick to his stomach as he realized what wasn't being said. Percy was willing to sacrifice McAllister to the Death Eaters.

Finally, Moody nodded.

Drake watched the interchange carefully, becoming more and more aware he was in over his head.

It was well-known Mad-Eye Moody supported Albus Dumbledore over the Ministry, and obviously the Undersecretary didn't like it. So why assign him to this?

Apparently, Moody had the same questions Drake did. "Why me, Weasley? You know where I stand."

The Undersecretary narrowed his eyes at Moody's familiarity. "I do. I also know you swore an oath to the Ministry when you became an Auror. I'm counting on you to keep that oath, Moody. You're the only one who can track the woman down. She's a threat to the Statute of Secrecy and we can't afford that right now. Do your job. Don't play the old man's games and I can minimize the difficulties for Potter. Play fast and loose with me, and I promise you Potter's life will be much harder once he's found." He held up a hand to stave off whatever Moody was about to say. "I have no intention of making things harder for him, but any irregularities and the Minister most certainly will, at least until Potter agrees to cooperate with us."

"Fine. Your rules, then, Weasley," Moody growled.

"Thank you, Alastor," the Undersecretary said with a politician's smile. "I'll send a team to bring the prisoners to the Ministry. You're cleared to find McAllister. You're dismissed."

Drake had to admit he wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of using the muggle woman as bait for a Death Eater trap, but he also acknowledged the Death Eaters would be after her, one way or the other. Obliviating her didn't sound like the best idea.

She can obviously take care of herself. Maybe we could work a deal with her? She keeps our secrets and we let her keep her memories?

Drake thought about asking Undersecretary Weasley about it, but the Undersecretary had already turned away from them to deal with the flight of paper airplanes zooming about his head and shoulders.

Moody motioned Drake to follow him out.

- 0 -

Okay, so today is officially the worst day of my life.

Gracie sucked on the end of her cigarette and wondered at herself. How had this become the worst day of her life?

Because they took the kid. Her stomach burned with anger. They shouldn't have taken her student. They should have stuck with her. Whoever 'they' were.

They're good. I've got to give them that. She blew out a streamer of smoke. They'd disappeared Duncan easily enough.

Once she'd started thinking clearly again, she'd suddenly realized Duncan hadn't been there – which was odd, because no matter how early she got the gym, Duncan was already there.

She'd gone to Duncan's flat to find he wasn't there, either. Along with everything in his flat. She'd checked with the building office, only to find out that as far the office knew, Duncan McAllister had moved out several days prior to the attack and his flat was now up for rent.

Which, of course, made no sense, as Gracie had been there just two nights before to have dinner and talk about their respective students.

The office had given her the phone number Duncan had left with them. To her surprise, the number had been good. After talking with Duncan, Gracie was fairly sure he thought she was crazy. The worst part was that she was starting to wonder if he wasn't right.

She'd found a payphone and called him as soon as she'd left the building office.

"Gracie! Good to hear from you! How's running the gym by your lonesome?" Duncan had been in a rare good mood.

"Duncan! What happened to you this morning? Why are you in London and why does your building think you moved over a week ago?" Gracie had been frantic for answers.

"Gracie, what the hell are you talking about?" Duncan had been confused and a bit worried the old lady was finally going senile. "Why would I be in Little Whinging anymore? I sold you the gym weeks ago, opened this new place in London. I only stuck around Little Whinging long enough to get you started with the Dursley kid's training, you know that." His voice was placating. Maybe she had just been worried about training Dudley on her own? She wasn't a boxing coach, after all.

The conversation had gone downhill from there, with Duncan getting more and more worried about his aunt. Finally, Gracie had to tell him.

"Look, Duncan, my student, Harry Potter, he's gone missing. Kidnapped, this morning."

"Harry Potter?" Duncan muttered. "Only student o' yours I know is Dursley. Good bloke. Wish I could keep him on m'self, but he'd never move to London, I think. This Potter kid was kidnapped, you say? Talk to the police, not to me! Great good god, woman! You, of all people, should know that!"

Gracie had assured him she had already talked to the police. That yes, she of all people knew better than that. She'd politely declined his offer to come back down to Little Whinging until Harry was found and hung up. She got the feeling if Duncan came to see her, she'd find herself locked in padded room very quickly.

Gracie was a trained investigator and wasn't given to jumping to conclusions, but she figured it was logical that whoever had attacked the gym had engineered Duncan's move and memory loss.

Even if that were technically impossible to do.

It further stood to reason that they'd done so to keep him out of the way. But they had tried to kill her. Why?

The kid. They wanted me dead because I'm close to Harry.

It was that sudden understanding that had inspired her plan to find whoever 'they' were and find Harry Potter. Because if she found Them and found Harry, she might find out she wasn't crazy.

It further stood to reason that if They were real, They were going to come after her again. She was a loose end. She'd seen Them, she'd seen what They did, and she knew They'd done something to and with her student. So she wasn't going to make it easy on Them. They were going to have to come to her on her terms.

First things first. Get noticed.

So she'd gone to the police station and reported Harry Potter missing. It had been a bit hard to report masked thugs with zap-sticks torturing and kidnapping her student and possibly her nephew so she'd left that part out. But the Inspector assigned to her case obviously thought she was crazy because there wasn't a single record of Harry Potter anywhere in the system. Apparently, her student hadn't ever existed. But the Inspector had taken the case out of professional courtesy. Her credentials from Scotland Yard got her that much respect, at least.

She'd gone from the police station back to the gym. She had stuck to her training and had approached the gym obliquely, keeping out of sight and observing from across the street first.

And for some reason, she'd had to concentrate entirely too hard to look directly at it. Every time she thought about it, her mind seemed to wander – only her anger and her fear and years of intense mental discipline had allowed her to concentrate.

She'd closed her eyes and summoned the void, building her mental defenses one by one – the same mental defenses she'd learned as a teenager, when her first boyfriend had made a hobby out of finding ways to slip her various forms of recreational pharmaceuticals. She'd forced out any thought but the one she was focusing on – looking at McAllister's Gym. Even then, it had been one of the most difficult things she'd ever done.

The effort had left her on her knees next to her bike, gasping for breath – but she could see the gym and the people milling around inside.

She had no explanation for why she'd had to fight so hard to just look at the gym, though. Unless she really was going crazy.

Once she'd pushed past whatever it was keeping her from really seeing the gym, she'd seen him standing there. He wasn't much to look at; middling height, middling weight, brown hair and brown eyes. But he was dressed in a dark gray robe and was holding a zap-stick in his right hand.

Then right in front of her eyes, another man appeared out of thin air without so much as a sound. The new man had been dressed in a ragged blue cloak, and had a wooden leg. He was the very definition of 'grizzled' and radiated intensity and power.

And there had been something about him, about the entire situation, that was disturbing familiar, but every time she tried to call up the memory she knew was there, it skittered away like water rolling off a window.

For a moment, she had considered charging across the street and doing rude and violent things to people until someone told her what had happened to the her student and her nephew.

But she hadn't. Her common sense won out. She wasn't sure there was any way she could take that many of them – and if they were associated with the black robes she'd fought earlier, she was fairly sure they'd be ready for her.

So she'd lit another cigarette and snapped a few pictures and headed back to the police station to tell the Inspector what she'd seen. She wasn't sure if she had been surprised or not to find out They had already been to the police station, because no one there remembered her coming in.

Gracie had left the police station and gone to get the film developed. An hour and a half later, she'd discovered the pictures showed nothing more than the front of the gym.

Even more proof she was in over her head.

She'd gone back to her flat and scoured it with bleach, grateful she'd kept the hardwood floors instead of carpet. She'd worked with gloves on and her hair tucked down the back of her shirt and she'd removed every sheet, blanket, piece of clothing, dish - everything and anything that a competent forensics team could use to identify her and she'd tossed into trash bags and thrown away in dumpsters several kilometers from her flat. Everything else she needed, she'd taken with her. The only traces she'd bothered to leave were traces of Harry. It didn't matter because They already had him.

She knew all the tricks. As far as she was concerned, they'd have to resort to throwing bones and looking in crystal balls to find her.

Her next stop had been the bank. She'd checked on several things – and yes, she owned the gym. She hadn't touched the money in the gym account, but she'd withdrawn all of her own money in cash.

She'd flashed her old Scotland Yard badge – the one she'd been given when she retired. It was meant as a keepsake and wasn't really official, but the bank tellers didn't know that. A few pointed questions later, and she'd learned where Vernon Dursley lived and worked.

She'd gone to 4 Privet Drive and watched from across the street. She saw a shell-shocked Dudley Dursley walking up to it in the company of a tall, weathered man with graying hair wearing a surplus army jacket. The two parted ways, Dudley walked inside, and the man waved his zap-stick in the air and vanished with a pop of displaced air.

By that point, Gracie was convinced she wasn't going crazy.

Her next step was obvious. The Dursleys knew some of what was going on and she was going to find out what they knew.

Draco Malfoy watched impassively as the young woman writhed in mid-air, the Cruciatus Curse working its terrible magic on her.

But she didn't scream.

Voldemort held the spell on her longer than Draco would have thought it possible for anyone to keep from screaming, but somehow, she did. She twisted and convulsed as the spell did its appalling work; faint whimpers and moans escaped from her clenched jaws, along with a trickle of blood running out the side of her mouth.

"Impressive, isn't she, Draco?" Voldemort turned his head to face the boy standing at his right side, simultaneously holding both the Levitation Charm and the Cruciatus Curse on her. "That she suffers so much, yet does not scream? Such...perseverance is worthy of a reward, don't you think?"

Draco's grey eyes watched her, his face a mask hiding his own exhaustion; he hadn't slept in almost two days and his mind was fogged by fatigue. He would not show weakness before the Dark Lord. To do so opened the way to madness and death.

Silently, he wondered if he had the fortitude to endure what the girl endured and not scream out, and he knew when his time came, he wouldn't hold out nearly as , if he had anything to say about it, it would be a very long time before he was in her place.

"Perseverance does not change her failure, my lord," Draco answered calmly. He had not failed the Dark Lord in any task he had been set. He had

stood beside the Dark Lord at the Standing Stones. He had fought at his side, and the Dark Lord had been pleased.

Yet, Draco knew success was a deceptive trap. The Dark Lord was subtle and quick to anger and Draco seen the price paid by those who were arrogant enough to believe they could not fail.

“Most certainly it does not.” Voldemort whispered, a dry, raspy sound that made the hair on the back of Draco’s neck stand on end. “Tell me, young Malfoy, if it were your father in her place, would you counsel mercy?”

Draco smiled a smile that had no emotion behind it. “My father would not be in that position, my lord. He would hardly refrain from screaming.”

Voldemort released the spells, and the woman fell to the ground, landing in a heap at his feet. He peered at the boy. “Mayhap you underestimate your father, but you avoid the question.”

Draco steeled himself and did something that later, when he was rested and had time to think about would have him shaking in fear.

He met the Dark Lord’s eyes.

“I would not presume to offer counsel, my lord.”

The other Death Eaters gathered – the few remaining of the Dark Lord’s inner circle – and those few of power and daring who had accompanied the Dark Lord to the Standing Stones fell silent.

The Dark Lord smiled. “And why, young Malfoy, would you forbear to offer counsel?”

Draco didn’t flinch. He didn’t look away. He stared into the Dark Lord’s glowing red eyes and knew he was being weighed. Measured. Tested.

“You are the Dark Lord. I am not even a Death Eater. What counsel could I offer, and what presumption would it be for me to believe I should?”

The Dark Lord turned away from Draco and put an almost fatherly hand on the boy’s shoulder. “It is true you are no Death Eater, yet you have served me well. Unlike others.”

His gaze fell on the girl’s crumpled body.

He kicked the woman in the ribs. "Stand, and receive judgment."

Slowly, painfully, the woman stood. She held herself as erect as she could, refusing to show weakness, though it was obvious her limbs were trembling. She tried to stand with dignity, despite the tattered and bloodstained robes she wore – the same robes she had donned that morning for her mission. She had been stripped of her mask and her wand.

Draco remembered his thoughts at the Standing Stones and suppressed a smile. He had been right. They had failed.

The Dark Lord was not pleased.

The woman looked slowly around herself and realized she was standing in the center of a circle of hooded, masked figures. Her eyes swept the room until they fell on the Dark Lord and the boy standing next to him. Like the Dark Lord, Draco was unmasked.

The girl met his eyes for a fleeting moment. If she saw sympathy or pity there, it didn't register on her face. He wondered what she thought, to see a schoolboy unmasked at the Dark Lord's right side.

There was a part of Draco that felt sorry for her, because he knew what the girl didn't. Her mission had never stood a chance of success. Potter was too well guarded, to say nothing of the boy's own skills or his remarkable survival instinct.

Her fate, either at the hands of Potter, the Ministry, the Order or the Dark Lord had been sealed when she had been ordered to accompany the others, no matter that she had been the most junior of those sent. Now, she would pay the price that inevitable outcome. Her loyalty in returning to the Dark Lord was being repaid in pain and most likely death.

Such is the path to power.

Most of those who had gone with her to deal with Potter had been under the Imperious Curse, Hypnosis Charm, or some other form of

mind control. Relatively few real Death Eaters had been risked, though all who were sent had been given the Dark Mark.

Three groups of real Death Eaters had gone. The first group had confronted Potter in the gym, backed up by the mind-controlled slaves; most of those Death Eaters had already been liberated from the Ministry. The second, and largest, group had been tasked to follow Potter if he escaped. No one from that group had been heard from. The third group, her group, were the youngest and newest Death Eaters and were sent to deal with the muggles. Three of them had dealt with Duncan McAllister. Normally, he would have been killed, but Lord Voldemort hadn't wanted to draw the attention that killing a muggle celebrity, however minor, would have attracted. The remaining six were to deal with Gracie McAllister.

In their defense, they had kept Gracie McAllister from interfering, though she had survived. Voldemort had ordered her killed, just to hurt Potter.

Everything had gone wrong and the Dark Lord had learned of it in the worst possible way, because at least one of those sent to deal with Potter had revealed that most crucial piece of information: where the Dark Lord was hiding.

Lord Voldemort had returned from the Standing Stones to find Aurors and forensic wizards searching the beautiful mansion Voldemort had taken for his own.

The Aurors were now dead – Draco had killed two of them himself. Voldemort had acted swiftly, moving to a back-up location and contacting one of their agents to release the captured Death Eaters, none of whom remembered informing the Ministry of anything.

Draco wanted to shiver at the memory of the Dark Lord's brutal Legilimency attacks on the liberated prisoners. If they had betrayed the Dark Lord, he would have discovered it.

Finally, late in the evening, after having searched for her Lord, the woman had returned to report, and the Dark Lord was punishing her failure.

She stood before him, somehow still proud in what Draco assumed were the last moments of her life.

“Do you know where you are?” Voldemort hissed the words, taking a step closer to her, his face almost touching hers.

“No, my lord.” Her voice shook, but she spoke strongly.

“This,” the Dark Lord gestured around him, at the stone walls, floor and ceiling, all lit by the flicker of torches. “is where I now abide, instead of the mansion you departed from this morning. Do you know why I abide in a cavern beneath the ground instead of a mansion?”

“No, my lord.” Her fear was obvious; it was obvious she wanted to look away from the Dark Lord’s eyes, but his will was stronger. She would look away only when he allowed her to.

“I am here because you failed,” he whispered, but everyone could hear him; it was a small magic that he needed no effort, no wand to cast. “You failed and our location was compromised, so I must abide in the cold and the damp. Some of the others, I can understand. Potter is a formidable wizard and his allies are strong.

“Your task was simple. Six of you. All you had to do was kill one muggle woman. Your compatriots are dead. You are not.”

Draco could almost feel her pulling herself back together. Her anger was an almost palpable thing.

She’s got backbone. It’s going to make her death hurt a lot more than it would have, but she’s got backbone.

“No, my lord, I am not.” She spoke slowly, her voice still respectful, still fearful, but the anger pushed her to heights of courage Draco would never have suspected. “The muggle Gracie McAllister was immaterial. The rest of my team – my friends – died at her hands to

give the others the time they needed to capture Potter. Once the muggle had overpowered them, it became clear that as the weakest of the group, I could not take her. I went to assist the others, but they had already lost Potter.”

Voldemort paused and smiled. “You are correct. But you still failed to kill the muggle. She has seen magic – and worse, she has seen Death Eaters.”

The implication was clear. She should have died trying to kill Gracie McAllister instead of running away like a coward.

The woman brushed her dark hair over her shoulders, her dark eyes shining fervently. “The woman is important to Potter and she obviously cares about him. We can use her, my lord.”

Draco knew desperation when he saw it. The woman – Kate. Kate Bradshaw – knew she was a dead woman standing. Her only chance was to bargain for her life.

The Dark Lord was correct. She was most impressive. Even to the last, she refused to give up.

If only she’d felt the same resolve fighting the muggle.

Voldemort stalked in a circle around her. “Yes. I can use her to get at Potter. Do you believe that thought had not occurred to me?” His smile grew as he savored her fear, her anxiety.

The Dark Lord whirled and faced Draco. “Tell me, my young apprentice,”

Draco felt gooseflesh rise as the Dark Lord spoke. There was meaning there Draco didn’t dare hope for, didn’t dare believe, “of your thoughts concerning their mission.”

For the second time that night, Draco met the gaze of the Dark Lord. He knew the Dark Lord could see his thoughts. He knew the Dark Lord would know the truth of his thoughts before he spoke. “They were doomed to failure.”

Hesitant, shocked whispers raced through the room at Draco's pronouncement.

The Dark Lord was not happy with what Draco had to say, but the expression on his face made it seem he was pleased with Draco himself.

"You have served well today, Draco," Voldemort repeated. "You fought at my side against the Druids. You killed two Aurors. Are you implying you could have succeeded where others failed?"

Draco exercised every shred of will he had not to fall to his knees and beg forgiveness. I won't grovel anymore. Not to him. Not to my father. Not to anyone. I'm through being a simpering little coward.

"No, my lord. I would have failed as readily as they." It was an easy admission to make. No matter how his skills had grown over the past year and more, he knew he was no match for the likes of the Order. And as much as it galled him to admit it, he probably wasn't a match for Potter.

He certainly hadn't been a match for the Weasley girl. He still seethed with shame over that defeat, and the punishment Pettigrew had meted out for it.

Even his killing the two Aurors had been an easy thing; he'd cast the Killing Curse while they'd battled Death Eaters.

"Why, my young apprentice, do you think failure was assured?"

It was the second time the Dark Lord had used that particular appellation. Draco felt a chill of both anticipation and fear run through him. He felt giddy with the possibilities, but he forced it down, using every shred of his will to control his emotions.

At Hogwarts, Draco gave in to his impulses. He said what he wanted, did what he wanted and didn't care about the consequences. More often than not, he came out on top. He knew he couldn't afford that here, no matter how much he wanted to sarcastically mock the

assembled Death Eaters and their stupidity for not seeing what should have been painfully obvious.

But he couldn't stop all his amusement from coloring his words. Who would have known the tactics he used to bait and trap Potter at school would elude some of the greatest Dark Wizards of the age?

"Directly attacking Potter always fails, my lord. No matter how well-planned or how cunning the attack, Potter will win in direct confrontation. It's what he does best. Defeating Potter takes multiple lines of attack, each hidden. You never come straight at him. You never match him on his ground or with his rules."

"It wasn't Potter that defeated us!" A voice from the circle. Draco recognized the Death Eater as one who had been in the group which had attacked Potter. "It wasn't even his muggle cousin! It was the bloody Aurors! Potter cast a Patronus and the next thing we know, we're fighting Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye Moody!"

Draco ignored him and continued meeting the Dark Lord's eyes. "A brilliant plan, my lord."

"Isn't it?" Voldemort hissed. "Tell them."

Draco saw the trap and almost smiled. If he hadn't really figured out what the Dark Lord was doing, if he was bluffing, the Dark Lord would expose his failure to everyone. But if he was right...

"We now know the extent of the protection on Potter. Our other agents have made it impossible for him to return to Privet Drive. He's hurt and he's vulnerable."

"Very good, my apprentice, very good."

A third time.

There were even more murmurs than before, but this time, they were fearful. There was already talk that those who had dared to go with the Dark Lord to the Standing Stones would take places in the inner

circle. But for Draco Malfoy to be thrice called the Dark Lord's apprentice?

Voldemort laughed softly and looked at Bradshaw. "You owe Draco Malfoy your life. Killing you would be a waste. You are pure-blood and you are strong. You do not give in to fear, and you seek to please me." He waved his hand. "Very well. Go find me the muggle. Bring her to me."

The woman fell to her knees. "Thank you, my lord, thank you. I will not fail again!"

"No." Voldemort smiled. "You will not. Draco!"

"Yes, my lord?" Draco answered calmly, bowing slightly, as if he had no fear of the Dark Lord's baleful gaze had fallen on him once again.

"You and Wormtail will go with her. Take whoever else you need. We will make this muggle our advantage, not Dumbledore's."

Draco bowed again. "Your will, my lord."

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Gracie McAllister's apartment was sparsely furnished and strangely devoid of personal effects. No pictures on the wall. No awards or memorabilia scattered around. The kitchen was clean, gleaming.

There was no sign Potter had been there. No sign McAllister had returned there after the fight.

Kate looked around the apartment, nearly impotent with rage. The junior Death Eaters with her sneered at her as she frantically searched for some sign of where Gracie McAllister had gone.

While she raged, Draco had wandered around the apartment, casting detection charms, looking for bits of hair, toothpaste residue in the sink – things he had never known muggles (or most wizards) to be able to effectively clean. Things that if found in Malfoy Manor earned house elves dire punishment.

The law of contagion, one of the most basic principles of magic, stated that objects connected to each other remained connected even after they separated. By finding something that had once been a part of Gracie McAllister, they could find her.

He'd learned this particular meticulous detective work from Severus Snape. The same methodical precision that made a potions master made a skilled detective.

He wasn't surprised when he found nothing. He was less surprised when Bradshaw found nothing. The only traces they found were of Potter, but they'd already known he had been there.

"Dumbledore's people have already been here," he told her. "It's clean. He has enough Aurors working for him that there's no way we'll find anything that will lead us back to her." He ran a manicured finger along a spotless white cabinet. "Some of her clothes are gone and the rest have been so thoroughly scoured you'll never get enough to trace her. Her muggle transportation is gone. So is her money."

She whirled on Draco, her wand in her hand. "The bloody Order of the Phoenix is not perfect, Malfoy. Neither are you." She gestured sharply at the other Death Eaters. "Go. Interrogate every Muggle in this complex until you find out where she went."

Under white masks, Death Eaters smiled; this was why they had accepted the Dark Mark – the chance to torture, to terrorize. To kill and drink in the screams of muggles falling before their power. They were pure-blood wizards and the world was supposed to be theirs for the taking.

Draco and Peter shared a look.

Kate was letting her emotions control her, just like he once had. He knew better, now. She was letting her fear and anger dictate her actions – but still, it might be worth investigating.

"She might be right you know," Draco admitted. "Someone might have seen something Dumbledore's crew missed."

"Even so," Pettigrew said, "this will attract muggle attention. How many will be dead come morning?"

Draco shrugged. "The muggles will come up with their own explanation. They always do. Besides, the Order won't be able to ignore this. Nor will the Ministry. They'll all know we're after McAllister, so they'll be after her too. She'll be hunted down and flushed out, one way or the other. We already know the Order is using the Ministry to find her. Our people in the Ministry will let us know when she's found. Either way, we'll have her."

Pettigrew looked hard at Draco. "And if we don't?"

Draco stared out into the late night gloom, straining to hear the screams that were just beginning. "Then we try something else. And we keep trying until the Dark Lord tells us to stop."

He held back a yawn. He was still exhausted. It had been this time the night before that the Dark Lord had come from his excursion into Potter's mind.

Once the preparations for the ill-fated mission had been made, the Dark Lord had called for volunteers. He had calmly told them he was going to visit the Standing Stones and add the power of the Druids to his ranks. He had dared them all to follow him, if they had the power and the courage.

Draco had dared. He had dared much since then.

He'd dared stand beside the Dark Lord at the Standing Stones. He'd dared to stand before some of the most powerful Loremasters in England and guard the Dark Lord's back. He'd dared to kill Ministry Aurors.

And the Dark Lord has called me his apprentice. Either he's mocking me or he's offering me the chance to dare more than I already have.

“You are walking a dangerous path with the Dark Lord, Draco.” Peter was standing next to him now. “You seek power, but at what cost? You risk much.” The rat echoed his own thoughts.

“If I’m not going to risk everything for the chance at power,” Draco said slowly, “then why am I a part of this to begin with?”

Draco looked up at the clock – barely after midnight. They had plenty of time. And since she was going to tear apart the complex with or without him, he might as well have some fun with it.

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Gray eyes watched the sun rise from behind green-tinted lenses.

Gracie McAllister was waiting.

She leaned against the wall of the bake shop and watched the red-brick building across the street, tendrils of wispy smoke curling away from the red glow at the end of her cigarette.

She had been waiting and watching since three am that morning.

In the hours she’d been waiting, she had barely moved except to light another cigarette as she disposed of the first in the trash can next to her. She’d been getting strange looks all morning, but she enjoyed the attention; it meant her prey would notice her. If there was one thing you could count on the man to do, it was notice when people looked out of the ordinary.

She was a patient woman. Patience was, after all, one of her few virtues. She knew if she waited long enough, the man she wanted to see would come to her.

And so would They. She’d escaped Them. She’d killed some of Them. If Gracie was right about Them, They would come for her. They’d watch her, follow her, even try to kill her.

They were welcome to try. She'd use Them to find Harry. Once she found him and knew he was safe, then there would be time for a reckoning.

Until then, she would wait. Vernon Dursley would come to her eventually.

Drake Stevens watched Gracie wait. He sat on a bench and strummed a guitar, just another bum playing for pence at a bus stop, out early to catch the first crowds. He watched Gracie, and had to admire her style.

She certainly didn't look like a woman fast approaching sixty. She was tall and slender, with whipcord muscles under smooth skin. Her features, too chiseled and too hard for classical beauty, were the features of a woman years younger. Her long, slender fingers seemed ill-adapted to the sort of violence her previous calling had demanded, but her eyes told the tales of that violence.

Steel-gray hair hung to her waist in a thick braid, and she wore faded blue jeans and tall leather boots that matched the well-worn ankle-length black trench coat she hid her cigarettes in.

But it was the glasses he liked the best – dark green frameless lenses that gave her a faintly sinister look. They hid her silver-gray eyes, making it hard to read her, but the lenses' very color drew the eyes of anyone she looked at for too long.

He wasn't surprised to find her there. Not really. Moody had told him where to look.

Moody's instructions to Drake had been simple. "She was in law enforcement. She'll start at the beginning – the Dursleys." The old Auror had ordered Drake to wait outside Grunnings until Gracie appeared, then watch what happened.

Moody was right about where to find her. It was surprising how well the old Auror understood McAllister, because the Ministry hadn't been able to find out much about her – her muggle records were hard to get a hold of, and there were large gaps in what they had gotten.

Officially, Drake's job was to find her, watch her, and figure out where she fit into everything to do with Harry Potter. And once he had, he was to Obliviate her.

Of course, Drake was fairly sure Moody knew where Harry Potter was. He was also fairly sure Moody had no intention of Obliviating Gracie.

He'd had a lot of time to think, watching her wait.

He'd been sitting on the same bus station bench for almost eight hours – but he was a Hit Wizard. His training had been grueling. Though he wasn't comfortable or happy, he wasn't as exhausted as he could have been.

It's a good thing I'm not truly exhausted. If there's one thing I have figured out, it's that you don't deal with Gracie McAllister exhausted.

He remembered the bodies of the Death Eaters outside the Gym. All five were dead: one had a wand shoved through his eye and another's jaw had been half-torn away from his face.

Five Death Eaters. Unarmed. Without magic.

It made Drake shudder to think about it.

Then again, the whole attack made him shudder. Nothing about the attack felt right. Most of the Death Eaters they'd captured had been mind-controlled, and those that weren't were new recruits. Only a few of them had been experienced, and Gracie had killed almost half of those on her own. And why go after the boy in the first place? Surely, You Know Who had to have known Harry was being watched.

Yet, Moody took the attack as matter-of-course.

Which brought Drake back to his theory Moody knew more than he was telling. It was no secret Moody was one of Dumbledore's staunchest supporters, and no one really believed Fudge's proclamation had dissolved the Order of the Phoenix.

He was torn. He believed You Know Who was back. He'd believed it since Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore had first said it, over a year ago. He'd said so, in fact, which had gotten him reprimanded by his superiors. If he were honest with himself, he wasn't sure the Ministry was doing enough to stop the Dark Lord. And in the spirit of being honest with himself, he knew, deep in his gut, that Harry Potter had a major role to play in the coming war. However, like most people he really had no idea how Harry Potter fit into the grand scheme of things.

When everything was said and done, Harry Potter was just a kid. A boy-wizard who had defeated You Know Who before he could properly walk and who just might do again. Of course, if Drake listened to rumors – which he frequently did – Harry Potter had faced You Know Who four more times since starting Hogwarts, and he'd come out on top all four times.

Five-zero, Potter. Good record, especially against the wizard that didn't lose unless he was up against Albus Dumbledore himself.

Which means there's a good chance the wizarding world is in the hands of an old man and a teenager.

It was odd to put that much faith in a kid, but that kid had been through more, beaten more, than Drake ever wanted to imagine.

And Gracie McAllister knew that kid. Had taught him. Hosted him in her home, let him sleep on her couch.

She hadn't known who he was.

It was easy to see why she was the kind of person who could be friends with the Boy Who Lived. There was something about her, something that bespoke of a great deal of strength, the kind of iron will even an attack by Death Eaters couldn't bend, let alone break.

The kind of single-minded determination that led her to stand outside a bake shop for hours and wait for one man.

Drake and Gracie spotted him at the same time. He waddled towards the bake shop, huffing and puffing.

Gracie moved to meet him.

Drake could only admire that kind of spontaneous grace; the ability to go from almost motionless to a fluid step out into the middle of the street, with only the rustle of leather and drifting cigarette smoke.

Vernon saw her and froze like a deer caught in the headlights.

“Where is he?” Her voice was hoarse, harsh, flinty from the hours-long barrage of nicotine and smoke against her throat, but the words were clear. Her intent was clear.

Vernon snorted. “Gone. Good riddance. He’s not welcome back. You people can keep the worthless brat.”

Something about Gracie shifted, becoming openly threatening. She’d just been intimidating before.

“‘You people’?” She asked. “I’m not one of Them, whoever They are. I’m Gracie McAllister and I taught your nephew. You should already know who I am, Dursley, if you were really taking care of the kid. I don’t know who those little shit-eating cult wannabes were, but they took him. I heard him screaming while six of them tried to deal with me. They’re dead. I’m not.” She didn’t move, but Drake got the feeling Gracie was circling, waiting for a moment to strike. “But you have reason to be afraid of me, don’t you? You’re afraid I know.”

Her smile was hungry. Predatory. “I was an Inspector, Dursley. I see things other ignore. I saw the bruises on him, Dursley. He wasn’t even allowed to shower. Or shave. Or eat.”

There was such bitterness in Gracie’s voice, Drake was starting to wonder.

What is she talking about? Not allowed to eat? Shower? Shave? Harry Potter is the Boy Who Lived. She can’t be talking about him! His fingers played over the guitar strings with a bit more emphasis

now, the strands of music reflecting his confusion. He'd read the declassified Ministry files on Potter. Everyone in the MLE did, at one point or another. He was supposed to be living in a comfortable, middle-class home, well taken care of.

He had a sinking feeling in his stomach he quickly identified as guilt. It was the kind of personal guilt you get when you see someone who has done something for you suffering. It's the kind of guilt you get when you know you've failed someone utterly, when they had never failed you.

Harry Potter had made himself a martyr to tell them all Voldemort was back, and after he was proven right, he went back to live with the likes of Vernon Dursley.

"And?" Vernon spat back at Gracie. "I tried for years to beat it out of him. I took him in. Fed him. Clothed him. But was he ever grateful? Did he ever care what we did for him? He's not my responsibility any more. He's theirs. You want to know about him? Ask them. If you can find them."

It took all of Drake's acting skill not to openly gape at Vernon Dursley. What kind of life had the savior of the wizarding world led? What kind of monster had Harry lived with?

He was a Hit Wizard, and he felt a great desire to rise up from his uncomfortable bench and demonstrate just what that meant to the miserable muggle being interrogated by McAllister.

Enjoyable as the thought was, he didn't think McAllister would take kindly to his interrupting her. So Drake stayed where he was and decided that the next chance he got, he was going to find the people responsible for taking care of Potter (at least, in the wizarding world) and ask them some pointed and uncomfortable questions.

Vernon tried to move towards the bake shop but Gracie shook her head slowly. "You're here. They're not. I'm asking you."

"Pah!" He was turning puce. "Think you're something, do you? Think you can bully me? Frighten me? I've been living with one of them

under my roof for near-to sixteen years, and I expect that's been quite enough. Now, if you'll pardon me, I have a breakfast to buy!"

Vernon tried to step around her, but Gracie moved with him – there was no way Vernon could escape from her. She stepped right up to him, her face in his.

"I swore I'd never do this again, Dursley. I swore I'd never become what I was again, because I was better than that. But I've never kept a promise to myself and I've never broken one to anyone else. I haven't forgotten you, Vernon Dursley. When I find him, I'll be back, and then you'll answer all of my questions."

Drake felt a shiver run up his spine. He barely knew anything about the woman, but he did know she was very dangerous, and that crossing her was something you did only after you'd stacked the deck, updated your will, and bought good life insurance.

Vernon laughed, for the first time sincerely amused. "No, I'm safe from the likes of you, because they won't want their precious secret out in the open. Don't blame them, really."

It left a bad taste in Drake's mouth to think that Vernon Dursley was right about anything magical. But he was – as long as there was some small shred of the old blood protections remaining, Harry might need the Dursleys. Moody had explained that much to him.

The Dursleys were protected.

Gracie wasn't.

Moody had explained that, too.

"Who are they?" Gracie asked, desperation in her voice.

Vernon smiled nastily. "They don't exist, McAllister. Go back home. Pretend this never happened."

Gracie shook her head. "I won't. You lied about him...as far as I can find, Harry Potter never existed. No insurance. No birth

certificate...nothing. You tortured him instead of nurturing him. But he lives with you and accepts what you mete out, and I'm pretty sure he thinks he has to. That someone makes him. Who are they, Vernon?"

This time Vernon ignored the desperate woman, and stomped towards the bake shop. This time, Gracie let him go. Her shoulders slumped, and just for a minute, she looked defeated.

"Damn."

Drake felt sorry for the woman, but breathed a sigh of relief that Vernon Dursley could be counted on not only to notice something weird, but to deny everything. It made him sick to his stomach to be grateful for anything about Vernon Dursley.

In fact, he was thinking it might not be a bad idea to go get breakfast himself. And ask Vernon Dursley a few of his pointed and uncomfortable questions. Maybe there was good reason his treatment of Harry Potter hadn't been reported to the Ministry, but as no one had seen fit to inform Drake of any such reason, he had no reason not to find out exactly what Vernon Dursley had done to Harry Potter and report it.

He looked up from his guitar, about to stand, and noticed Gracie McAllister was no longer standing in the middle of the street. She was standing in front of him, staring down at him from behind her dark green glasses.

"I don't know you, busker, but I do know you're one of Them. I don't know what you and yours are. I don't know that it matters." She flicked her cigarette into the trash bin. "I'm going to find him. I'm going to find out who and what you are."

Drake sighed. This was why Hit Wizards didn't do surveillance. He wasn't good at hiding in plain sight or being a spy. He was good at the selective and judicious application of violence. His mission briefings usually included the phrase 'acceptable collateral damage.'

He just kept looking at her, waiting for her to go on. Sometimes, it wasn't a good idea to say anything.

She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit a new one. “I shouldn’t let you walk away. I should have a long and strenuous conversation with you where you tell me everything you never wanted me to know. But I really can’t do that right now.”

Drake realized something very obvious. Gracie McAllister had no idea there were at least two factions of wizards interested in Harry Potter. She had only met one faction, and that faction had tried to kill her and – as far as she could tell – had kidnapped her student.

He got the distinct feeling the situation was about to get very complicated and very messy – if it weren’t already.

“What I am going to do is let you take a message back to your boss. Tell him it’d be a good idea if someone told me what was going on and gave me the kid back, otherwise I am going to start making myself all manner of nuisance. If I have to find the kid on my own, it won’t be pleasant or fun for anyone, least of all your crowd, whoever in fuck you are. And if y’all decide the best way to deal with things is to get rid of me, I’ll have to get really nasty.”

Drake shrugged. In training, his instructors had told him he had a few options in situations like this. Go for his wand, call for backup, or play nice.

He knew better than to go for his wand. He was good, but this close, Gracie was better. And since he got the distinct impression she really did want to kill him, he wasn’t inclined to give her any excuse.

Five death eaters. Without magic.

He didn’t have any backup that could get there before she killed him.

Drake decided to play nice. “I’ll tell them. I don’t know that it’ll do much good.” He gave her the truth. “Mostly because we don’t have him. We were hoping you could lead us to him.”

Gracie sniffed disdainfully. “Really now?”

“Really,” Drake answered. “There’s more than one group of us, you know. I’m one of the good guys, believe it or not.”

After what he’d learned about Harry Potter’s life, he was wondering if he really was one of the good guys.

She snorted. “Is this where you tell me it’s safer for me if I don’t get involved, let you do your job and the rest of the bullshit you’re supposed to shovel down my throat?”

He held up his hands helplessly. “Pretty much, yeah. I can’t stop you though, can I?”

Gracie shook her head. “Not really, no.”

“I didn’t think so. Instead, I’ll tell you to be careful and that anyone in a black robe with a white mask will try to torture and kill you for fun. Just because they can.”

She nodded slowly, accepting the advice for what it was. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Drake let Gracie turn and walk away; the tracking spells he’d already cast on her would allow him to find her later.

For now, he had to report to Mad-Eye – but he wished he knew who he was really reporting to: the Ministry of Magic or the Order of the Phoenix. He wished he knew which one he should be reporting to.

With my luck, I’m working for the bad guys and the good guys are as clueless as I am.

Moody was waiting for him outside Gracie’s flat.

The old Auror’s face was grim and his good eye was narrowed. He looked at Drake and motioned him over to the foot of the stairs that lead up to Gracie’s flat.

Moody held up a hand. “Listen.”

The Hit Wizard fell silent and listened for several minutes, but he couldn't hear anything but the faint noise of traffic on a nearby road.

"I don't hear anything."

Moody nodded slowly. "That's the problem. Muggles are always up and about making noise, running around, doing things, even at this ungodly hour of the morning. And we hear nothing."

Stevens went pale, and Moody simply confirmed what he was afraid of.

"The Death Eaters are following her all right. Unless I miss my guess, everyone in this complex is dead and the Death Eaters are on her trail. If I'm right, this is a message. They're know what we're doing, and they're a step ahead of us."

Drake didn't like the sound of that. "Even if they're a step ahead of us, I don't think they'll find McAllister before she finds them."

Moody grunted. "So what'd she have to say after the spotted you?"

"What makes you think she spotted me?" Drake protested.

Moody's magical eyes swiveled over to Drake. "She would have spotted a disillusioned Auror under an Invisibility Cloak."

"Oh." Drake said before launching into an explanation of the morning's events. It only took him a few minutes to relate his conversation with Gracie to Moody.

The old Auror smiled. "Doesn't surprise me. It's why I told you not to try to fight her. There'll be time enough if we need to modify her memories."

Drake gave Moody a long, hard look. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you know this woman."

Moody shrugged. "Maybe I do."

Gracie guided her bike through Little Whinging.

Her confrontation with Dursley had proven she wasn't going crazy. They really were out there and They probably were out to get her. They'd certainly been out to get the kid. It'd also convinced her that Vernon Dursley and his wife were scum of the worst sort.

But she would deal with them later. After she'd rescued the kid. Or taken care of whoever had killed him. Because at this point in her life, Gracie didn't have a whole lot she really cared about. Until Harry Potter had re-appeared in her life, she'd been content to live off her pension, whiling away the twilight years of her life in the back room of her nephew's gym.

Training Harry had woken her up. Reminded her that even if she had retired, there were things she could do to make a difference. As the weeks of training had passed by, Gracie had started to have all sorts of thoughts she'd never considered. Thoughts of going back to London, reconciling with her teacher. Of volunteering to work with troubled kids or something like it. Doing something worth doing again.

Maybe she still could. After she got her student back.

She hadn't slept. She'd grabbed a bite to eat, bought more cigarettes and staked out Grunnings. She'd been gratified to see she wasn't the only one. The grey-cloaked man she'd seen at the gym was sitting on a bus bench, strumming a guitar. He was acting the part of a busker, but was really, really bad at it.

She didn't know why she'd confronted him. She wasn't sure she was glad she had, because all the conversation had done was muddy the waters. Made her unclear who the good guys and bad guys were. Unless, apparently, they were wearing black cloaks with white masks.

At best, she'd managed a cease-fire with one side. At worst, she'd told a whole new group of Them that she was a danger to Them.

She wasn't sure she cared.

All that matter was that They were after her. Apparently, both factions of them.

She grinned. Fine by her. But they were going to have to catch her on her turf and play the game her way.

She needed insurance, in case she was made to forget. She stopped by a coffee shop and got herself some breakfast and wrote a letter. She borrowed an envelope from the shop and went to visit Ken Morrison.

He looked at her strangely when she asked: "Do you remember the kid I came in with the other day?"

"Yeah. Harry Potter or something like that. Skinniest damn teenager I ever did see. Cut you a discount on the price of the kit, too. Figured you were trying to do the kid a nice turn."

Gracie had sagged with relief. They hadn't gotten to everyone. Still, they were dangerous people who didn't seem to care who they hurt or what they had to do to get what they wanted.

"Yeah, something like that. I'm going to need to ask you a weird favor. Probably will be the strangest thing anyone's ever asked you to do."

Ken had shrugged. "Ask away."

"When people come asking you about Harry, pretend you don't know who they're talking about. Pretend that as far as you know, no one named Harry Potter ever existed. And if the kid comes looking for me, give him this." She'd handed him the letter.

Ken had looked at her strangely, but he knew her well enough to know she wouldn't explain any more than she already had. He'd nodded and taken the letter. "If it were anyone else askin', I'd say they were crazy. But for you, I'll do it. What do I say if they ask about the kit I sold you?"

"Tell 'em you don't remember selling a kit to me or me ever having a kid with me."

Ken had nodded again. "All right, then. I get the feeling I won't be seeing you for awhile, then?"

Gracie shook her head. "No. I'll contact you, if I can."

Ken hugged her. "Take care of yourself, Gracie."

"I always do." She left, taking the long way out of the Afternoon Market.

She went back to the gym, and found it gone. Again, she wasn't sure if she was surprised it was gone, or at how fast they'd worked. She'd stood there, astride her bike, across the street from the place that had been her haven for so long.

It was something she'd learned as an investigator – a location was always there, but a place could change. The gym was the place; the building the location.

The gym was gone. The equipment was gone; the windows were boarded over, and the sign was painted over. There was a 'for lease' notice on the front door.

On a whim, she'd gone to a nearby pay phone and called the leasing agent listed on the sign, and found out the building had been up for lease for almost a month. No one had been there since Duncan McAllister had moved out at the beginning of summer.

She almost laughed. Instead, she'd lit another cigarette, climbed back on her bike, and figured that with Harry having never existed and Duncan gone, she was next.

What the hell are they trying to do? Erase my life? Erase the kid's life?

The thought was another disturbing one; not because of their grudge against her – that was easy to explain. She'd gotten in their way, killed a few of them, and had generally gone and made a nuisance of herself.

They were going to have to work pretty damn hard to erase her.

It disturbed her because of what it might mean for Harry.

The kid's tough. She kept repeating that to herself, hoping if she repeated it enough, she might drown out the memories of his screams.

She straddled her idling bike and sucked on the end of a cigarette.

They must think this is going to be easy. Just get rid of one old woman who saw too much.

She could feel the faint stirrings of anger in her guts; true, she'd been angry before, but it was the red-hot anger of someone who's just been robbed or slapped. This was different.

This was the sustaining rage. The cold, creeping anger that drove men insane and small-minded to lifetimes of obsession and petty revenge.

Anger is defeated self.

It was one of the first precepts her teacher had taught her. To follow a path out of anger, to act out of anger would ultimately bring defeat, because anger was fleeting; transitory. It was a state of mind as much as an emotion – and the emotions and desires anger brought with it left when anger did.

“Never give into anger,” Master Tal Shan had told her. “Never let it rule you. But never be afraid to be angry.”

Her gray eyes flashed as she blew out a cloud of smoke. She had never been a good student, not when it came to the philosophy.

Part of her whispered a silent apology to her Master while the rest of her plotted. Her next move was easy. They wanted to hunt her? They would have to do it on her terms, on her ground.

She glanced out of the corner of her eye and she saw a familiar busker hiding his face from her, sitting at the bus stop across the street.

They were following her. They'd followed her every step of the way, waiting for their moment to strike.

That was fine.

They could follow her to London. Her city.

They could follow her through the deep parts of London no one liked to admit were there; warrens and alleys and places beneath that weren't on any map.

While they blundered around, she was going to go to ground. Reconnect with her old contacts, and start asking uncomfortable questions until someone told her what was going on – because someone in London was bound to know who They were.

First things first: she needed to re-fill her bag of tricks. She glanced at her watch.

I have just enough time to get what I need.

She swung herself back over her bike and kicked it into gear.

It didn't take her long. She stopped off at a hardware store and a chemist and a couple of other, smaller and lesser known shops.

Just after noon, she was on her way to London.

End Chapter

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